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凪良 NAGISHIRO
BLACK BULLET
ヘヴィオブジェクト
The Outer Gods 外なる神
電撃文庫

Novel Illustrations

鎌池和馬
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イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
The Outer Gods 外なる神

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[メビウスインフィニティ]MOBIUS INFINITY

「資本企業」が運用する陸戦専用第三世代のオブジェクト。多国籍合同軍事演習「ギガントバスラー」に参加したオブジェクトの中でも突出して高い破壊力を持ち、「最も脅威の高い」機体と目されている。

球体状本体の背面上部に備えられた三門の主砲は、正面から垂直まで自由に角度を変える事も可能な超大型レールガン。推進装置は静電気式を採用しており、五つの輪を重ね、花弁のような形状を取る。

主砲の砲弾には姿勢制御用の翼があり、真上、超高高度まで射出した砲弾を「メビウスの輪」のようにターンさせる事で相手を頭上から撃ち抜く戦法を好む。レールガンの運動エネルギーと超高高度の位置エネルギーを掛け合わせたその一撃は、隕石の衝突実験にすら匹敵する破壊力を生み出す。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)

HEAVY OBJECT
HEAVY OBJECT
HEAVY OBJECT
HEAVY OBJECT
name/Mikoto Tsukiji
sex/female
age/14
height/152cm
weight/51kg
eye color/sky blue
class/First Lieutenant
affil/37th CMB
rank/Ace
name/Nanami
sex/female
age/14
height/151cm
weight/48kg
hair color/blond
eye color/sky blue
class/Ensign
affil/37th CMB
rank/Rookie

フローレイティア
クウェンサー
ヘイヴィア
ヨグ＝ソトース
ニュースメーカー
ニャルラトホテプ

俺は逃げない。
もうやるべき事は全て終わらせた。
今さら、『この先』を思い描くほどの夢もない。

—とある『邪神』の呟き—

HEAVY OBJECT

The Outer Gods

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
外なる神

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Weekly Military News – April 3 Special Edition "The Soberania Disturbance has Begun!!"

Monica: "This is Monica, your battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill! Today I think I'll speak with an expert about the Soberania Disturbance that has occurred near the Panama Canal. And our military commentator is of course this person here! This former colonel has won countless battles as an Object's strategic commander and is now an influential commentator. It's Mister Catherine! Mister!!"

Catherine: "Don't you dare call a lady 'mister'. Do you want me to give you some cosmetic surgery with my fist?"

Monica: "I don't want to hear that from someone with a butt-chin, an eyepatch, and stubble. Now, let's get to the topic at hand. What do you have to say about the Soberania Disturbance officially caused by the Capitalist Corporations' invasion?"

Catherine: "The Soberania District was a blank region, so it didn't even have an Object. It was obviously a bad idea to pick a fight with the Capitalist Corporations which have plenty of Second Generations."

Monica: "But the district was a permanently neutral nation, so the Capitalist Corporations are sure to receive international criticism for invading."

Catherine: "By the way, a recent search found secret training camps in the Soberania District. And not for a regular army. These were for special commandos trained in guerilla warfare, terrorist attacks, and sabotage. They were meant to attack safe countries."

Monica: "That goes completely against the idea of clean wars, doesn't it? The Soberania District borders the Panama Canal, so it's obviously positioned just south of the Capitalist Corporations' home country."

Catherine: “Professionals who can create inhumane weapons at an abandoned gas station are much more frightening than a strategic weapon that stands out and would be spotted even in the most cursory inspection. So before an actual terrorist attack could begin, 7th Core – the seven giant corporations that manage their home country – began to directly clean up those camps. It does make sense, but…”

Monica: “But?”

Catherine: “Once this is over, who will own the Panama Canal which is so crucial for transportation? I know I shouldn’t speak on pure speculation, but this disturbance smells fishy to me.”

Monica: “What’s this!? Could it be a conspiracy theory!? Those things have a way of getting our viewers on the edge of their seats!!”

Catherine: “Well, it’s not like there’s ever been a war *without* a conspiracy behind it.”

Monica: “Why’d you have to kill our excitement, you butt-chin!!”

Chapter 1: The Season in Which the Flower of Hell Blooms > > Battle for the Arctic Course through the White Sea District

Part 1

“Pant, pant.”

Short, frantic breaths continued without end.

The city was buried in rubble. None of the buildings retained their roofs and the ones with all four walls were rare. Some had not even kept their box-like shape, so only a wall or two stood up like a monolith commemorating the failures of mankind. Those walls of what used to be reinforced concrete filled the wasteland.

And that was where Quenser and some other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were running for their lives.

They were completely out of breath and they were panting like thirsty dogs.

“Pant, pant, pant!! Pant, pant, pant, pant, pant, pant, pant, pant!!”

Behind them, dust from the collapsed building materials rose like a cumulonimbus cloud. But they knew that obvious “gazes” were piercing them from beyond that obscuring curtain. And they knew they were being pursued by the possessors of those abnormal and clearly inhuman “glowing eyes”.

A continuous metallic sound followed them.

None of them knew what exactly was pursuing them. Everyone who had been dragged back into the dust had died.

There had been no exceptions.

“Dammit…”

Quenser desperately ran while sticking his tongue out like a starving dog. Without stopping, he chucked some Hand Axe plastic explosive behind him and used his radio to detonate it.

There was an earsplitting explosion, but the dust did not clear up.

And whatever was beyond it did not stop their advance.

“Dammit!! What the hell is this!? They’re clearly eating people…no, are they actually laying their eggs in them!?”

Quenser trembled in fear and his legs nearly gave out, but someone tugged on his arm. The handsome, black-haired man then shouted in his ear.

“Don’t stop running!! If we escape to the landing zone, the chopper will pick us up!!”

The sound of rotors beating the air passed by over their heads.

It was a Legitimacy Kingdom transport helicopter. The side cargo door was wide open and a ground support Gatling gun known as the Crocodile was sticking out.

His awful friend Heivia yelled angrily over the radio.

“Keep your heads down as you run!! I’ll be shooting from up here, but don’t you dare stop. If you’re late, we’re leaving you behind!!”

A solid block of sound burst out with no noticeable gap between individual shots. The variable gear switched over to the highest setting which sent 7.62mm bullets into the many forms beyond the dust at a rate of 8000 a minute.

Orange sparks covered everything.

But the bizarre silhouettes that looked like insects or armor did not stop moving.

They gained ground on Quenser’s group running along the surface.

The great noise and light was enough for the humans to instinctually shrink back. When fired from above, the Crocodile had a similar effect to a lightning strike or a stun grenade. Quenser cowered a little even though he knew this was covering fire from an ally, but the handsome man grabbed his arm and pulled. He almost seemed to drag Quenser along as he ran.

An unnatural stream of fluorescent pink smoke rose up ahead.

It was about two hundred meters away. That smoke grenade signified the landing zone. The escape helicopter was already waiting to leave. In fact, it was floating a few dozen centimeters above the ground. The pilot was getting ahead of himself from fear.

They were going to be left behind.

That fear pushed Quenser onward. He swung both arms up as he ran.

“Wait! Please wait!!”

As he shouted, the soldiers right behind him were overtaken by the dust and swallowed up. He could not look back anymore. Quenser and the handsome man ran with all their might. They climbed over waist-height rubble and ran smoothly forward. Finally, they arrived at the landing zone.

The dust was right behind them.

But the helicopter started to take off as if the pilot could not stand it any longer.

Quenser and the handsome man grabbed onto the landing gear and dangled from the metal rods. The helicopter quickly ascended and they were carried into the empty sky with no lifeline. The gray dust seemed to graze the bottom of their military boots as it filled the landing zone.

“Did we…make it?”

The handsome man crawled up first before reaching down and pulling Quenser onboard. Several other helicopters rose from the city of rubble. Heivia was leaning out nearby, still firing his Crocodile Gatling gun.

A voice arrived over the radio.

“Wing Master to all helicopters. Twenty seconds until the heat-treated missile strike. If you don’t want to be thrown from your

helicopters, close the cargo door or fasten in with a harness! Brace for impact! They're about to blow!!"

An ominous wriggling seemed to compress space itself more than destroy the target.

The gray-filled surface was painted over with a different color: a blazing orange. The explosive flames covered an area of four square kilometers.

A crosswind tossed Quenser and the handsome man's helicopter around like a paper airplane. The handsome man was just about thrown from the open cargo door, but Quenser somehow managed to grab his arm.

"Is it…over?" blankly muttered the handsome man as he leaned out of the helicopter.

The great explosion had eliminated all trace of the dust.

Some blackened masses had been scattered everywhere. That was what remained of "them", the creatures beyond the gray curtain. Heivia fired the Gatling gun down on them, but they showed no sign of running away. Those were nothing but corpses.

After seeing that, Quenser finally wiped the sweat from his chin with the back of his hand.

And a smile found its way to his lips.

But…

"Wait…a second," muttered the handsome man.

His head was pointed in the wrong direction. Everyone else was looking down at the outcome on the surface, but he alone was looking in the exact opposite direction: straight up.

A moment later, a shadow covered everything.

It was almost like the entire area had been covered by a giant roof.

What was it that handsome man was staring at with such disbelief?

“Is that…‘their’ mothership?”

Part 2

It was April and a middle-aged man's deep voice rang across a great plain in the White Sea District, a battlefield country.

"Cuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuut!! Awful!! Simply awful!! Redo it all from the beginning! You, extra over there! Do you even have a brain!? You're not supposed to stand out more than the lead!! Showing off isn't going to increase your pay!!"

No matter how much he shouted, his voice was not going to reach them and all communication was being handled over radio, but Film Director James Honeymoon still shouted into a megaphone, waved the megaphone around, and beat a nearby assistant director's head with the megaphone.

Needless to say, everyone around him was fed up with it all.

He apparently believed in filming everything with practical effects instead of CGI, but each retake required resetting all of the explosives and smokescreens. It took a huge, huge, huge amount of time, money, and effort.

After the transport helicopter landed somewhere, Quenser disembarked and complained to the rest of the soldiers.

"Ten kilometers long? Is he screwing with us? If something that big simply flew full-speed into the atmosphere with toxic materials stuffed inside, it'd cause a disease-ridden ice age."

"I wouldn't say that if I were you." Heivia walked up after disembarking another helicopter. "The military is giving its full support in the filming of this movie. It's clearly a form of wartime propaganda, so it must be sponsored by some VIP way, way, way up the chain of command. Complain about it and you're picking a fight with something too big to even see."

Quenser and the other "extras" were not guaranteed a break while the explosives were set up. They were paid the same amount of tax

money either way, but sometimes they were forced to work on and on with no end in sight.

“This whole thing is because the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance are really starting to get into the movie business, which is making the Legitimacy Kingdom look like the bad guys, right? So our mass media is getting into the entertainment business real fast. But it’s useless. Completely useless. Why is it useless? Because we’ll never catch up if we’re following their lead! We need to predict what’s coming and make the first move that blocks their way or else it’s all wasted effort!!”

“Oh, how scary. But I’m not complaining. If you want pick a fight with a VIP and get yourself sent out to the backwoods, do it on your own.”

It was the same reason that safe country quiz shows had started punishing wrong answers by attacking the young entertainers with special masked commandos who threw stun grenades in through the doors and windows.

Meanwhile, the handsome man with sparkling and silky black hair walked up in a military uniform that did not suit him in the slightest. He was the lead actor and he had a permanent marker in one hand.

“Heh heh heh. Don’t be so grumpy, my little kittens. How about I give you my signature? Would that give you some motivation?”

“Wait, that’s a military supplied backpack!! Don’t write directly on it! And is that thing permanent!? Oh, no! Now I’ll have to pay for it!!”

“And you even call other guys your ‘little kittens’? Get away from me.”

The scattered soldiers had slowly gathered when they heard talk of signatures. He was a well-known actor and he was apparently skilled at motivating people, even if not for the reasons he intended.

Quenser was angry at the unsolicited signature he had been given in

the midst of the confusion, but then he asked Heivia a question.

“By the way, where’s the Princess?”

“Same as before. She’s been sulking ever since seeing that storyboard where the space cruiser blows away an Object in one hit. She’s probably still holed up in the Baby Magnum.”

It must have looked like the famous actor was getting along with the assisting soldiers because some of the crew gathered with a large camera. They may have been getting some behind-the scenes photos.

“Okay, here we go. Smile, smile! Three, two, one.”

The picture they took would later become an oft-discussed legend in a certain corner of the film industry.

After all, several dozen smiling soldiers all raised their middle fingers in perfect unison.

Part 3

“It’s all wrong!! You can’t set off all of the explosives at once! You start over there and move this way!! You add a lag into the detonation time to create a wave! Why do I even have to explain this to you morons!? Every last person in the audience would notice immediately!!”

As the director complained far too much for a man his age, Frolaytia held her head in her hands.

In truth, she and the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion were in the middle of a military operation. They had a target they were meant to destroy and they should have sent the Object out right away.

They were in the White Sea District, a battlefield country sandwiched between the Legitimacy Kingdom’s Volga District and the Northern Restricted Zone.

That frozen land was ruled by blizzards of -30 degrees during the winter, but things were different in April.

Simply put, the melted snow created swamp-like sludge for over ten thousand square kilometers.

This was not good news for the Baby Magnum’s static electricity propulsion device that had to attach floats for naval battles. They were waiting to see how it could cross the deep swamp that caused tanks and armored trucks to sink.

(But we’d never hear the end of it from the inspectors if we just sat here doing nothing. No one wants to listen to them asking if we’re having flower viewings on the people’s tax money, so we were forced to deal with a low-priority matter.)

“Besides, the full cooperation of the military is only added value.”

The director – she could not remember his name – spoke in a voice considerably too high-strung for his body type.

“It’s like a preorder bonus, a limited-time-only product, your first love, or a girl’s virginity. Those things are only a bonus. If the base product is awful, it’s meaningless. So why do you have to, y’know, be tripping me up like this…”

“Ahhh, I want to punch this guy.”

“Pardon me?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

Frolaytia used every muscle in her face to maintain her smile.

As part of their image campaign, the Legitimacy Kingdom was engaging in information manipulation to send out the disturbing message of, “The military is full of good people☆ The Legitimacy Kingdom are the good guys☆” She would ruin all of that if she went on a rampage and caused an unnecessary incident here, so she was forced to shake her butt like a model when she walked, smile like a saleswoman, and keep her back straight and her chest out to accentuate her bust. If an intelligence officer had not spent three days and three nights explaining the logic of this operation, that middle-aged man would be hanging upside-down from a helicopter as he was dragged through the swamp.

Her information terminal rang.

She checked the screen and found it was from a major general who was probably enjoying a round of golf in a safe country.

“So how does it feel to deal with those fools who have never seen real war?” asked the man. “I have to deal with them in meetings year-round.”

“This has been an important lesson that using someone is a lot harder than just killing them. In fact, that lesson is still ongoing.”

“Peace is precious and we will do whatever it takes to maintain it. As a soldier, you must never forget that original purpose of ours. And if you gain the patience to remove your claws and fangs, maintain a smile, loosen your necktie, undo the top three buttons of your blouse, and show off your cleavage in front of the camera like

the director wants, then you might just have a future as a soldier who lives a life of luxury without ever visiting the battlefield."

"This may be too forward, but I will kill you, sir."

"Hah hah hah. You really are more suited for the battlefield. And I suppose it's about time we ended this lesson of yours."

"Meaning?"

"The plan your battalion suggested was approved. Find a good stopping point for the work there and head to the next site. War is waiting, major."

Frolaytia instinctually gave a crisp salute.

"I love you, sir."

"Hah hah hah. Now you're being a little too friendly. If I were half a century younger, my heart might have skipped a beat."

"I'll tell your wife you said so, sir."

"Do you *want* to see a man in his seventies cry?"

Part 4

“Phew…”

The Princess slowly piloted the Baby Magnum into the giant maintenance facility and left the cockpit through the elevator-like tunnel.

The maintenance soldiers quickly swarmed the Object and used a pressurized liquid detergent fired by special nozzles to remove the mud and soot caused by the unnecessary filming.

That filth would hardly be a problem for a First Generation Multirole built for all weather and environmental conditions, but before heading out to a real battle, they needed to eliminate anything with even a 0.1% possibility of causing an error.

On the maintenance scaffolding a level below from her, the Princess heard the sound of a carbonated drink being opened amplified several hundred times over. She also saw Quenser Barbotage covered in bubbles.

“What are you doing?”

“Nbwah. Wait, what is…? Dbyah! It won’t stop! Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!?”

The Princess glanced over at the old lady giving instructions with a tablet device in one hand, but that old lady showed no interest in helping Quenser. Any job given to a battlefield student was going to be something that did not really need doing in the first place.

And so the Princess decided to ignore him as well.

“Oh, honestly. I want to go take a shower.”

The special suits worn by Pilot Elites were made to resist blades and bullets, but they also provided high-level body temperature regulation. It was effective enough that she only needed that suit to get by in the desert, the rainforest, or the Antarctic. However, that did not change the fact that she was sometimes simply in the mood for a shower.

And whether he heard what she said or not…

“Brmrgrbrbrdrmrzr!?”

“Bfh! Wait, Quenser!”

Quenser was unable to control the nozzle as it waved right, left, and every direction in between, so its bubbles shot straight up toward the Princess on the next level up.

The white bubbles to the face took out her vision and she stated choking, but then she felt the floor slip out from under her.

She slid down the surface of the spherical main body and fell right on top of Quenser on the scaffolding below.

She knocked Quenser onto the wire mesh floor.

“Cough, cough.”

“Mgh… Princess… Gh… Wait…”

The old maintenance lady’s eyes widened and she shouted “You fool!! Are you trying to end the war early!?”, but the two of them had bigger issues to worry about.

First, the Princess had landed on her butt and that butt was flattening Quenser’s face.

Second, this was not a love comedy zone, so what happened to a human skull when someone’s full body weight was pressed down on it?

Quenser would later claim his brains nearly came out his nostrils.

But at the moment, his focus was on making sure all the blood coming from his nose was not misinterpreted because that could easily lead to a beating.

Part 5

“It’s time for war, everyone!! I know you idiots are tired of using your heads and forcing a smile, so work off some steam by moving your body.”

After a large number of soldiers gathered in the conference room, Frolaytia began from the dais up front.

A map was projected on the wall behind her. It contained countless dots with arrows connecting them.

“Our objective this time is not the destruction of an Object. We need to destroy an anti-establishment copied weapons factory discovered deep in the White Sea District. All of the military weapons technology leaked from cyber attacks or seduction is given physical form here and then sold to terrorists around the world. They do business with some notable groups like the Tundra Tigers, Woodstock, and the Traitorous Apostle. You could say it was the mess those groups caused that brought attention to this factory.”

Photographs and plans for a few weapons were displayed.

But Battlefield Student Quenser’s expression did not change much when he saw them. They were handguns, assault rifles, hand grenades, and shoulder-fired rockets. While they would cause a major incident in a safe country city, they had no connection to Object development.

“Currently, April’s melted snow has turned most of the White Sea District into a deep swamp. It covers an area of ten thousand square kilometers. The Arctic Ocean lies behind it, but we can’t touch it because the world powers are busy arguing over some new sea route there. Going there could easily trigger a war. That’s why the Baby Magnum has been stuck here and that’s our biggest problem. Based on the depth of the swamp, tanks and armored trucks would be useless too.”

Quenser was bored, so he raised his hand.

“Then why not send in attack fighters or bombers?”

“I would love to, but look at these dots scattered across the map. The purple ones.”

Frolaytia used her pen-shaped laser pointer to point at the projected screen. There were thirty to fifty of the purple dots.

“The factory noticed our approach, so they’re using helicopters to carry some of their spare weapons inventory around the swamp. These are antiaircraft guns.”

A small window was added.

The video file showed mid-sized military trucks with no canopy over the back. Instead, pedestals covered in four meter long and twelve centimeter wide metal tubes were half-forcibly welded or bolted to the beds of the trucks. The gun turrets were angled up toward the sky and the trucks looked something like a dangerous tow truck.

Quenser frowned.

“Won’t these things sink as soon as they’re place in the deep swamp?”

“They have a wooden frame built around them with countless plastic containers attached for buoyancy. There’s a risk of them flipping over as soon as they fire, but this group isn’t actually an army. They probably don’t know how to use the weapons properly.”

Frolaytia placed her kiseru back in her mouth and continued on.

“These antiaircraft guns have poor aim. In fact, you could say they give no targeting assistance whatsoever, but they fire thermobaric rounds. Simply put, they’ll create an eight hundred meter explosion of flames. They’re like the ABM rounds of an older age. They could wipe out all of our aircraft just by shooting those things like crazy. A bombardment that covers an entire surface is difficult to overcome even with a saturation attack.”

“What about cruise missiles or ballistic missiles?”

“I said they’re using ABM rounds, didn’t I? Not even Mach 5 or 8 is enough. They’re not aiming; they’re creating a giant wall in the air for the enemy aircraft to run into. We were hoping to pack a coagulant inside surface-to-surface missiles to disseminate the coagulant in midair, solidify the swamp, and let the Object through, but even that requires silencing these Rafflesia thermobaric antiaircraft guns first.”

This time it was Heivia who spoke up and he had a stiff smile as he did so.

“Wait, wait, wait. Those things are firing tons of thermobaric rounds that create eight hundred meter explosions, right? If we go after them, we’ll be turned to cinders before we even get close.”

“Fortunately, the Rafflesia antiaircraft guns have a limited angle of fire, so they can’t fire horizontally. They’re attached to trucks floating on a wooden frame covered in plastic containers, so if they aimed horizontally and rotated the gun, it would bump into the truck’s cabin. But if you carelessly get close, it’s possible they’ll self-destruct as one final attack, so we won’t target each antiaircraft gun individually.”

A new arrow appeared on the map.

“All of them are controlled by central electronic commands. The only people around the antiaircraft guns themselves are crew to load the ammunition and guards. You’ll be ignoring the antiaircraft guns and instead heading straight toward the weapons factory in the center. If you can blow away the command vehicle with shoulder-fired missiles, all of the cannons will fall silent. Then we can fire surface-to-surface missiles loaded with a ton of coagulant to harden up the swamp and the Object can clean up the rest.”

Tanks and armored trucks could not travel through the vast, seemingly-bottomless swamp and they could not exactly swim the entire way, but if they used an amphibious hovercraft that used the power of air to remain afloat, the journey would go smoothly.

“By the way,” added Frolaytia. “A notable individual recently arrived at this copied weapons factory. She goes by Yog-Sothoth

and her real name is unknown. She is a white hacker who slipped into the electronic simulation division by fighting back against the intensifying cyber attacks, but she was under investigation by the Black Uniforms as a possible Capitalist Corporations spy. The last thing Yog-Sothoth accessed were the plans for an invisible bomb. This could get ugly if she brought that to the copied weapons factory."

"An invisible bomb?"

Quenser frowned at the unfamiliar term, so Frolaytia displayed a new document.

It was a weapon shaped like a three meter black soccer ball.

"The concept is simple. The bomb is sent into the sky dangling from a giant balloon filled with helium. It has attitude control and allows for some level of laser guidance, but it has no primary propulsion. It simply rides the wind. And since the outer shell has undergone advanced stealth treatment, it doesn't show up on radar. Slipping past visual detection is easy and it can't be detected by its heat signature since it has no primary engine."

She lightly shook her head.

"In other words, it's a bomb that can only move slowly but can slip through any air-defense network. And if they load it with one of those thermobaric warheads, the risk of a direct attack on a safe country only rises. I want to settle this before that happens and before they even show a hint of playing that card."

Their top priority was destroying the command vehicle in charge of the Rafflesia thermobaric antiaircraft guns.

Their second priority was defeating Yog-Sothoth, the hacker who had arrived at the copied weapons factory.

"I doubt they'll stay holed up in this hideout now that it's been located. I wish we could hold the Arctic Ocean, but the international interests there are so complex we wouldn't even be able to sweep for mines like we wanted. They're sure to escape on

one of the submersibles they use to carry materials and products. You can assume we're only rushing this plan because the time limit is approaching fast."

Yog-Sothoth was a woman in her early twenties, but Quenser was not sure if that was young or old for the hacker world.

The other important individual was the factory manager. He was a middle-aged man known as Newsmaker. Since he had no real name, he had likely received cosmetic surgery and faked his death a few times to hide his identity. Naturally, only someone doing something wrong would need to take such steps and Quenser did not want to imagine how much blood had been spilled along the way.

"You will be given Factory Manager Newsmaker and Yog-Sothoth's personal information, but don't go out of your way to capture them alive. Only a fool would lose his life for a bonus. I'll handle the complaints from the higher ups, so if things get dangerous, you can choose to kill them."

"You're being surprisingly weak-willed here. Did something happen?"

"Don't ask that, Quenser. It's probably just that time of the month."

A kiseru with an orange flame burning at the end struck Heivia and he started writhing around on the floor.

Frolaytia ignored him and answered the question.

"Thanks to that hacker, things are a complete mess up above. The satellite surveillance network covering the Arctic has been rendered completely useless thanks to some interference. We're guessing it's due to a clone satellite, but it will take time for the electronic simulation division to isolate and eliminate the cause. And that means we can't use the eyes meant to stare down at the chess board from above."

"A clone satellite?"

"It's a standard example of a hardware crack. A satellite using a similar frequency is sent near the military satellite to interfere with

our signal, intercept our signal, or even slip in some suspicious signals of their own. It's probably disguised as a small civilian satellite only forty centimeters across and it was probably sent down from orbit using the Capitalist Corporations' elevator. Simply put, we can't rely on the dots on this screen."

Support from the sky above could make a world of difference in a game of tag or hide-and-seek. Searching out and crushing hidden targets in that vast combat zone filled with a deep swamp would indeed take a lot of work. The odds were good time would run out before the search was complete and the targets would escape. And of course, rushing things increased the risk of being caught off guard.

"Just out of curiosity, what is the bonus for capturing them alive?"

Frolaytia readily answered Quenser's cautious question.

"Well, it will have to be in the realm of what I can grant, so how about a triple burger, a veritable mountain of fries, a soft drink, and chicken nuggets?"

"You might as well just order us to our deaths!!"

Those soldiers only had soap-like flavorless rations to eat, so she had essentially just told them to capture the targets alive even at the cost of their lives.

Part 6

And so they ended their cooperation with the movie shoot that had been so very, very boring that some had suspected it was a stress test. Soon thereafter, Quenser and Heivia were thrown out onto the battlefield.

They were stuffed into small ten-man hovercraft that raced across the sticky and squishy marsh.

The entire area was covered in brown mud, but it lacked the distinctive rotting stench. The snow was melting for spring, but the number of active microbes may have been low.

“It doesn’t look all that impressive from above.”

“Stop it. This isn’t just some tidelands. Fall in there, and you’ll sink up to your chest right away. As stupid as it sounds, you wouldn’t be able to crawl back out if you got even one leg in there. Dying in this nasty mud would be a real tragedy. No microbes will get close, so you’ll be pulled out as pristine as a mummy in a pyramid and displayed in a museum or something. Look.”

Heivia pointed in a random direction with this thumb.

A flat surface of brown mud continued as far as the eye could see and even beyond the horizon, but protrusions with artificially straight lines poked up here and there. Something had sunk into the mud there. Those were the results of tanks and armored trucks trying to cross the swamp or other trucks attempting to save the crew.

Not a single tire or tread was visible. Quite a few were nothing but metal roofs just barely poking up above the mud, but there were probably others completely submerged that they could not see.

“It’s like a snowy road; you won’t slip as long as the tires are moving,” said Heivia while the warm wind on his cheeks almost made him forget this was the Arctic. “That’s why people let their

guard down. They realize they're not sinking and decide they can make it where everyone else failed. And then when they slow down a little to turn or something, they start to sink. I don't know whether these are from the Legitimacy Kingdom or that copied weapons factory, but this place has swallowed up a ton of lives."

Quenser and the others were using more than just one hovercraft. Forty to fifty of them were crossing the marsh in a large reverse V formation.

The sky was just as unusual as the ground.

The clouds were thick enough to weigh down on them as mental pressure, but there were some other objects in that sky that clearly did not belong. There were hundreds if not thousands of them. As far as the eye could see, spheres about a meter across floated in the gray sky like a wall or curtain. The giant eyeball drawn on each one made the scene all the more psychotic looking.

Quenser did not look pleased.

"Are those the invisible bombs we were briefed about?"

"How about you try to think for yourself before asking? It should be obvious that those simple spheres have no stealth capabilities whatsoever. I'm guessing they're barrage balloons mass-produced using the same tech. They're just balloons with bombs attached. They leave less room for aircraft or missiles to fly through and the antiaircraft guns fire through the gaps. They make an aerial wall."

Heivia actually sounded shocked at the enemy's methods.

"That's why we can't do any surveillance or bombings from some ridiculous altitude like 25 or 30 thousand meters up. To get up that high, the aircraft sacrifice precise handling. If they flew into an area of sky filled with bombs, they wouldn't be able to avoid them and they'd be blown apart."

"I see," was all Quenser said.

Only an Object or the giant machines inside an industrial complex would excite his mecha heart.

The student then spoke up, sounding entirely carefree despite both land and air being blocked off on this battlefield.

“What’s the point of this battle anyway?”

“A sea route through the Arctic Ocean. Polar bears are on the verge of extinction thanks to global warming, but a bunch of idiots are going nuts because they see a business opportunity.”

“Didn’t they say we’re getting rid of everyone in the way of a development base for that new sea route and an underwater oil field? But can’t they just say we’re driving out some guerrillas or terrorist? And besides, I doubt they can transport materials and heavy machinery to the coast through this mud, so can they really maintain a port?”

“I doubt they’re actually planning to build a port. Terrorists are criminals, not soldiers. Looking ‘civilians’ in the eye and slaughtering them with an Object sounds bad, so they came up with an alternate reason. The specific reason doesn’t matter as long as they can eliminate the risk of that new sea route being filled with mines.”

The Volga District, a safe country, was insistent on obtaining that Arctic route, so they had sent out a battalion to drive away an Information Alliance Object station in this battlefield country. For them, this mission was only a detour, so they did not want to get too serious about it yet did not want to be stabbed in the side either.

“And we’re stuck dealing with odd jobs again. Honestly, what’s the point of going to a battlefield without an Object?”

“Stay vigilant, Quenser. You don’t want to die on this ridiculous odd job, do you?”

“You think we’ll be attacked here? How? Infantry can’t walk through the mud and the Rafflesia thermobaric antiaircraft guns can’t fire horizontally. Even all these tanks and armored trucks are sunk in the mud. They wouldn’t have any way to-…”

He never finished his sentence.

One of the tanks supposedly sunk and stranded in the mud suddenly fired its gun.

“Wah!?”

“Dammit, the thing’s still alive!? No, wait…”

Heivia revved the engine. The three giant propellers pushed the hovercraft forward and past the stranded tank.

As if to target them, the machineguns on top of the armored trucks and the tanks’ guns moved unexpectedly smoothly to aim their way.

“This was no accident! It was an attack formation from the beginning!! Dammit, now they can target us from all 360 degrees!!”

An explosion sounded and the hovercraft racing along right next to theirs was tossed into the air like a toy. The ten soldiers inside were thrown on top of the mud. They did not have time to hesitate, turn back, or collect them. The sunken vehicles were targeting Quenser and Heivia’s hovercraft as well.

“Smoke!!”

Heivia gave a shout and ten to twenty drink can sized cylinders flew from the side of the hovercraft in a fan shape. They created small explosions in midair and produced an unnaturally white wall of smoke. Something tore right through the cotton candy-like wall: improperly aimed tank shells.

Meanwhile, Heivia started preparing the shoulder-fired missile launcher hanging from a shoulder strap.

“What should I do!?” shouted Quenser.

“If you’ve got nothing to do, curl up in a ball!!”

Heivia shouted back, rested the launcher on his shoulder, and peered through the sight.

He aimed toward the closest tank that had let itself sink halfway into the mud. Its turret was rotating their way.

As soon as he fired, the hovercraft carrying Quenser's group was destroyed. It flipped on its side and slammed into the mud. A moment later, the fired missile tore into the tank and filled it with explosive flames. Who could say how many tons the turret weighed, but the entire thing was lifted straight up like a manhole cover during a flood.

"Gaaaaaahh!?"

Quenser did not have time to check on all of that.

The flavor of iron spread through his mouth and a soft sensation enveloped his body. He was already waist deep in the mud and he could not move his lower body. No matter how much he twisted his hips or swung his arms, he could not move a single step.

And he was gradually sinking even further.

In all seriousness, he could easily sink down to the very top of his head and suffocate.

"Dammit…I need something!!"

He swung his arms around randomly and felt something hard with his fingertips.

It was a piece of hull stripped from the hovercraft. The panel of composite material was about the size of a hotel room's side table.

He managed to pull it close and pressed both palms against it. He now had a handhold to keep himself from sinking. He forced himself upwards as if doing a push-up and got his upper body on top of the panel.

He paddled his arms and legs in the mud to somehow move forward as if on a body board.

"Heivia! And everyone else!! Find something – anything! – you can use as a float! Otherwise you'll sink!!"

Hearing that, the soldiers thrown out across the mud started moving. They used whatever they could find to remain afloat: hovercraft fragments, broken pieces of wood, plastic containers used for who knows what, etc.

Heivia also moved through the mud like he was using a body board and he shouted into his radio.

“Requesting datalink support!! Use the heat sources to tell which tanks can move and which are junk! And how about some help from the Object!? It can fire long range using the targeting data of our rifles, right!?”

“Our eyes in the sky are useless thanks to the clone satellite! Destroy them yourself!!”

“Goddammit! Isn’t it your job to figure out a way around that!? There are shells flying all over the battlefield! If one of those hits us, we’ll be blown to bits!!”

“If a false signal is mixed in with your support request, the Princess will fire her main cannon right on top of you. Are you sure you want that!?”

The surrounding soldiers tore armor panels from the destroyed hovercraft to use as floats, kicked at the mud, and escaped behind the tanks and armored trucks. But they could not trust those shields. The turret might turn their way at any moment and a shell with a lead attached could be remotely detonated inside it.

“Heivia, Heivia! Begging them isn’t going to help. We’ll have to do whatever we can on our own.”

“What the hell are we supposed to do!? How many tanks and trucks do you think are sunk in this mud? And I’ve already fired my missile!!”

Meanwhile, a hovercraft a short distance away was fired on by a sunken armored truck and the hovercraft fired its Crocodile Gatling gun back. Quenser and the others were being lured deeper into the attack formation. There was a risk of attack from the tank guns up

ahead, to the side, and behind them. Staying still would be an all-around bad idea.

“I feel like a mudskipper.”

“Goddammit, I’m a noble, you know? There’s something wrong when I’m paddling through the mud with shells flying everywhere. …Couldn’t I be taking a leisurely trip across the water on skis or something?”

While it was far better than sinking into the bottomless swamp, dragging their entire body weight while crawling across the water was not easy. The viscosity made it even harder than crawling on land.

“Besides, how far are we going? There are tanks and armored trucks everywhere. Even if they can’t move around, their weapons and armor still work. We can’t stand up to that with the firepower we have on hand.”

“Heivia, don’t use your assault rifle. I don’t want some stupid punchline where it explodes because the barrel’s packed full of mud.”

“You want me to take on armored weapons with just the bullets!?”

“No, we have all the firepower we need in the sky.”

“What? Is Joan of Arc finally descending from heaven in bikini armor!?”

“Heivia, I try not to trust people who seriously talk about bikini armor, but are all nobles like that?”

The student sounded fed up.

“I’m referring to those creepy eyeballs.”

He pointed straight up while still lying down on the panel of hull.

“Did you call them barrage balloons? Well, hundreds or even thousands of bomb-equipped balloons are floating above us. Bring

them down, and it'll be raining bombs. Plus, the top is the most fragile part of a tank or armored truck. …Download the formation on your handheld device. We need the locations of our allies, of the balloons, and of the tanks and armored trucks. We avoid the ones above our allies and shoot down the ones floating over those armored weapons."

"It's true those eyeballs are arranged pretty randomly. And their altitude ranges from ten thousand meters to only five hundred. We might be able to shoot some of them down with just a rifle." Heivia gulped. "But where the bombs land is still up to chance. With the wind and air resistance, they won't fall straight down. We can't drop the bombs on them that easily."

"Yeah, if it was just one or two of them, it would probably be trickier than getting a hole-in-one." Quenser smiled a little. "But we have plenty of chances. We just have to keep it up until we hit. I'm sure we'll hit at least once if we shoot down a hundred of them. We just have to make sure we don't drop any on our allies."

"What a pain. So it comes down to a gamble, does it?"

The noble spat out the words.

But then…

"In that case, there's no way we can lose. I'd never let some nouveau riche bastard steal my villa in a card game."

Part 7

Explosions sounded out without end.

Checking through binoculars showed nothing, but one glance at the flat LCD screen was enough to tell the number of barrage balloons was dropping. At the same time, scream-like reports continued pouring in from the attack formation disguised as stranded tanks and armored trucks.

The intercepted military radio signals were encrypted, so what they were saying was unknown. Still, the frequency of signals had increased considerably, so the soldiers were obviously elated as they approached.

It was as if they had found an opening.

The group swarmed toward this one idea like ants.

“Just as expected.”

Newsmaker spat out his low voice. He was the middle-aged man who ran the copied weapons factory that gave physical form to the information stolen by terrorist organizations and guerrilla groups around the world.

“The springtime swamp saved us, but scattering the contents of our warehouse wasn’t enough to drive off the Legitimacy Kingdom. We can continue as planned. How many of the Flying Fish were serviced in the time that bought us?”

That man was stubborn and picky about his field of expertise, but he looked far kinder than in the image usually shown off. His current wrinkled brow looked out of place with the rest of his face.

He wore a military uniform produced at this factory, but it looked more like a factory uniform. He may not have been the type to harm others and take things from them.

“Forty eight of them.”

The subordinate who replied looked like a slender literary young man.

“We won’t have time to prepare the rocket motors for the rest. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers would be here by the time the liquid fuel was loaded.”

“We can drag them down into chaos well enough without that.”

“But the thermobaric warheads were a failure…”

“That was to be expected. With our level of tech, we would have been lucky if one in twenty of them detonated. The whole point of this act was to make sure they didn’t catch on to that.”

That was why they had not been able to surround the factory with thermobaric bombs as if they were nuclear mines. The Rafflesia antiaircraft guns had not been in working order either. Even one in twenty detonating would kill a lot of soldiers, but if the enemy knew a lot of them were duds, they would take an optimistic view and charge right in. That would defeat the purpose of the barricade.

“How are the rocket motors?”

“The ones on the Flying Fish to be sent out are in perfect working order.”

“Then we’ll be fine. That provides enough power on its own. We don’t need to insist on the thermobaric warheads.”

Newsmaker briefly fell silent as he thought about the meaning of the rocket motors and the outcome they would bring.

And finally…

“I’ve finished the list of volunteers. I’ll join you after completely erasing the data on our clients.”

“Newsmaker.”

A female voice spoke from the side with a somewhat low tone.

The woman wore ready-made white and neon pink skiwear. She had likely chosen the outfit after hearing she was going to the Arctic, but the sweat on her forehead made it obvious that had been a bad decision. She had her long blonde hair stuffed inside a knit cap and she looked something like a college girl or a new office worker.

But she was not.

She was Yog-Sothoth, a Legitimacy Kingdom white hacker and also a spy from a Capitalist Corporations intelligence agency.

“There’s no need to go this far. I only asked you to help as much as you were able and this is clearly going beyond that.”

“It will take another thirty minutes before the submarine arrives on the coast, so we need to buy some time.”

“But this isn’t the right way to do that.”

She slowly looked back at the several dozen identically-shaped weapons filling the vast space.

Yog-Sothoth had been born into this age of war and had come into contact with plenty of technological information about weapons, but even she found these to be an oddity. The factory workers who had built them had likely felt the same. No one would actually want to ride something like that.

“Newsmaker, I thought I taught you that the key to psychological warfare is increasing fear and that killing is just one means to that end. The killing isn’t absolutely necessary. If you want to increase social unrest and paralyze administrative functions, you only need to cover walls and guardrails with stickers and spray paint meaningful-sounding graffiti on apartment doors. What you’re doing here is extremely inefficient.”

“But painting eyeballs on the barrage balloons did not stop them.”

“But it had some effect. Our psychological warfare is affecting them far deeper than they realize. If we move to the next step and shake their hearts even further, their unit will collapse into chaos without

any bloodshed."

"Sorry, but we lost people in that attack formation," quietly replied Newsmaker. "We're already past the point of no return."

It was obvious to everyone there that he was intentionally suppressing his emotions. With the likely exception of himself, that is.

"Think back to all the dramas and movies you've seen. Human emotions and the human heart are most strongly stimulated by death, as sad as that is. We feel happy when an enemy dies, we feel sad when a sickly girl dies, we feel fear when the protagonist is about to die, and we feel angry when the heroine is about to die. … Death is an almighty tool to draw out any emotion. And right now, we need an immediate effect. Making it a little more obvious than absolutely necessary is just what we need."

"But!!"

"Yog-Sothoth, you head to the harbor and wait for the submarine. We'll buy the time you need. Our piece-of-junk factory couldn't fully recreate the classified information in your head, so you find someone more useful. That will change this world in a big way. You can change the world."

"…"

She cursed in her heart that it was not supposed to be this way.

Their objective was obvious. They were a buffer faction born in the Arctic. With the world map shattered like stained glass, if the various vague gentleman's agreements were broken, the boundary between battlefield country and safe country would immediately vanish. The only guarantee was the fact that "we've been doing this for decades, so everything will be fine". That was why the buffer factions aimed to build obvious buffer zones between nations to lower the risk of a major metropolis becoming a battlefield. That was the kind of peaceful ideology this group subscribed to.

Of course, the major nations immediately rejected the idea of buffer

zones as unrealistic because they restricted the amount of usable land and gave criminal organizations space for relay bases, increasing the flow of weapons, drugs, and even human trafficking.

Neither side was willing to compromise, so the weaker group had no choice but to rely on something beyond mere words.

To vanish after the fact, they needed to construct a stepping stone, so Yog-Sothoth had taught them how to construct a trump card without killing.

She had known her technological information was too much for them to handle. They could barely recreate any of the weapons to a usable level, but simply coming into contact with someone holding such high-level military secrets was enough to increase their perceived status. They should have been able to manipulate information enough to obtain a powerful bargaining chip without spilling any blood. Namely, the unignorable bargaining chip known as a bluff.

That was all it should have been.

But…

“I understand.” The middle-aged Newsmaker gave a small self-deprecating smile. “But this is what we ended up choosing. It’s not that we had no other choice. We specifically chose this card from the many in our deck. No matter what you say, we were nothing but filthy terrorists. We live in a different world than a pacifist like you.”

“Newsmaker…”

“We made a lot of different weapons here and scattered them through the world. We’ve caused a lot of chaos in the carefree safe countries, but it just doesn’t feel like we’re doing anything at all. I know intellectually that staying hidden in the background is safer and more reliable, but it doesn’t sit right in my heart that we’re talking about changing the world but aren’t standing in the line of fire ourselves.”

Was that what he truly thought or was it a way of thinking he intentionally used to suppress the fear?

“You live on. It would be a waste if you died here.”

The conversation did not continue.

It was cut off.

Yog-Sothoth felt like an obvious line had been pulled back and a thick barrier of glass had come between them. Newsmaker turned his back and walked toward the weapons. She could no longer reach that back as it made a loud announcement.

“We are the Crown of the Northern Lights! We wish for peace in the Arctic and the northern hemisphere as a whole!!”

The first wave of pilots approached those bizarre weapons and the man spoke as their leader.

“We will be lost here, but that will be the trigger needed to awaken our latent comrades as the Sixth Branch. We are not alone, so face forward. For the sake of our still unseen comrades, we will pave the path to tomorrow by demonstrating the Sixth Branch that is not trapped in the existing five!!”

That proclamation was as obvious as a fast food burger yet it contained a strange heat. When Yog-Sothoth heard it, she looked to the weapons once more.

They were known as the Flying Fish.

They were hovercraft equipped with rocket motors. This group had failed to reach the level of fighter craft or ballistic missiles, but they had jury-rigged together parts from a number of blueprints to create these nightmarish weapons that skimmed only a few dozen centimeters from the surface at 880 kph.

Their primary weapons were 20mm heavy machineguns and 80mm multiple rocket launchers.

And…

Part 8

After Quenser and Heivia started shooting down the barrage balloons overhead, the others around them started doing the same. Bombs rained from the sky. Some Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were nearly blown away on occasion, but they still managed to destroy most of the attack formation sunken in the mud.

The few that were lucky enough to survive were dealt with using shoulder-fired missiles and the like.

“Place the injured on the capsized hovercraft. Only the hovercraft! Place them on the wreckage of the tanks or armored trucks and they could get caught in the explosion if one of their shells goes off!!”

Heivia held a piece of an armor panel below his stomach like a body board as he shouted instructions around.

Quenser was similarly floating on top of the mud and he was staring into the distance as he lay on his stomach.

“This might be over sooner than we thought.”

Black smoke was rising there.

Some of it came from the tanks and armored trucks they had been targeting, but some of the fallen barrage balloon bombs seemed to have hit the Rafflesia thermobaric antiaircraft guns.

Once they were out of the picture, the Legitimacy Kingdom could fire their cruise missiles.

And once the coagulant was scattered from the air and the marsh quickly solidified, the Baby Magnum could be sent out. Once that happened, it became a perfect game for them.

But just as he thought that, he heard an odd noise.

“What’s that?”

It sounded different from a car or motorcycle engine. It was higher-pitched and more like a whistle. Quenser grimaced as the high-pitched roar stabbed at his ears and he saw several shapes arranged in a horizontal line and approaching from the horizon.

But by the time he saw them, they were already incredibly close.

They were fast.

The formation carried a mass of air with them as they passed right by the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. A moment later, intense pain exploded in Quenser's ears and a dull pain spread through his chest like his lungs had been forcibly overinflated.

"Gyah!?"

"Dammit! What are those things!? Hovercraft!?"

Based on the direction they came from, they had to be weapons from the factory, but they moved right past Quenser and the others.

Their objective lay elsewhere.

"Frolaytia!! The barrage balloons might be filling the radar with readings, but something insane is racing around below them. They're probably trying to attack the maintenance base zone! Prepare to intercept them!!"

Even as he shouted over the radio, the second wave arrived.

They formed a reverse V-shape like a flock of migratory birds. When they saw that the hovercraft were equipped with heavy machineguns and multiple rocket launchers, the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were filled with fear as well as surprise. Some even aimed their assault rifles and grenade launchers toward the approaching enemy.

Fortunately, the enemy was moving in a completely straight line, so it was not difficult to target them even with their extreme speed.

There was an explosion, but it was large.

It was far too large. The grenade launcher was only meant to fire hand grenades farther than could be thrown by hand, so it could never have caused this explosion. Like an accident at a fireworks show, explosive flames covered dozens of meters and a shockwave swept out even further.

Quenser had been lying on top of an armor panel, but he was tossed into the air and slammed into the bottomless swamp-like mud.

“Bh…gah!? What…the hell? Did we set off something inside it?”

“Dammit, this isn’t right. Something about this isn’t right! Dammit!!”

To keep himself from sinking, Quenser grabbed nearby piece of wood and spat out the words with mud covering his face.

He looked to the wreckage of the hovercraft scattered about in the distance.

The wreckage continued to burn with orange flames even when it fell into the wet mud. There was plenty that could have exploded, like the ammunition or the rocket motor fuel, but no matter how much he tried to make sense of it, it seemed too unsafe. Pieces of the structure were completely unnecessary for an armed hovercraft. It was like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces of an entirely different puzzle mixed in.

“You’re kidding…”

“What is it, Quenser?”

“This is no joke. They’re really using this ridiculous weapon in battle!?”

Part 9

Quenser's warning and the support of the maintenance base zone's large Doppler radar were both unnecessary.

The Pilot Elite Princess was on standby inside the Baby Magnum's cockpit and she had already detected the change through the monitor.

Enemies were quickly approaching on the surface or at extremely low altitude.

The first wave was eight craft and the second was ten.

"This is a little earlier than expected, but it's time to get down to business. Based on their movements, I'm guessing they're missiles. Please shoot down all of the enemy craft directly targeting us."

"Understood. I will intercept them without leaving the base zone."

It was a simple job.

The First Generation Objects had been originally designed to endure an attack by nuclear missiles. Even if they were moving at Mach 5, at Mach 10, or even faster, being able to perfectly intercept dozens of ballistic missiles scattered throughout the air was the bare minimum of what the Baby Magnum was designed to accomplish. These craft were only moving at the speed of a passenger plane and their numbers were low enough to count on her fingers, so this was hardly going to be a problem.

Anti-air laser beam cannons stuck outward from all across the spherical main body, making it look something like a sea urchin or a chestnut bur, and they began sending out massive amounts of silent destruction.

The five kilometers to the horizon became an absolute barrier.

That caused her to let down her guard.

And that proved to be a catastrophic mistake.

(Is this all? That's a bit of a letdown.)

As she accurately shot down the approaching weapons, she opened a small window to analyze what it was she was destroying. It was a lot like staring at the dust at the back of a shelf while cleaning. She did not particularly want to do this, but it did bother her somewhat.

And then she learned the truth.

"…Eh?"

These were not unmanned weapons following the zeroes and ones written into their guidance chips.

They were not missiles simply following the terrain based on a GPS signal.

They were hovercraft with a certain level of weaponry attached. They were only maintaining their ridiculous speed thanks to the rockets forcibly attached to the back.

The normally exposed top had a makeshift canopy added on to protect the human body from the overwhelming winds.

Yes.

There were people riding them.

Based on the scale of the explosion, these were more than mere weapons. They would charge into the maintenance base zone's barrier or even inside the base zone itself and then detonate the rocket motors on their bellies to cause the most damage possible.

They were used just like missiles.

The heavy machineguns and multiple rocket launchers were not the main weapons. Those armaments were only meant to eliminate anyone attempting to interfere with their course and thus raise the odds of the hovercraft itself reaching its target.

And that revealed the true form of these weapons.

“Manned…missiles?”

“Dammit!!”

The old maintenance lady cursed loudly while staring at a thin tablet computer in the Object maintenance bay.

She had lowered the device’s voice communication volume to zero.

The Princess’s voice coming in directly from the cockpit had exceeded the level of a mere voice. An earsplitting scream continued without end and she was not responding to anything the old lady said.

The old lady then contacted Frolaytia who was in the center of the maintenance base zone.

“Are you checking her vitals, too!? She’s clearly rattled on the psychological front. Frankly, it’s a miracle she hasn’t vomited yet. If this keeps up, it’ll affect her interception accuracy. They’ll be able to push through!!”

“We’ve located the cause. The factory is most likely using handmade manned missiles. This wasn’t accounted for on the Princess’s chart.”

Some people might call her soft.

After all, war was war, Objects were the symbols of war, and a single movement by an Object could kill countless people. So what was the difference if the gun-wielding infantry were now piloting manned missiles?

But that was not how it worked.

Not in the slightest.

“When people kill on the battlefield, they always have a reason or

excuse ready for it. Some do it consciously while others do it unconsciously."

The old lady spoke with a bitter look on her face.

In older wars, soldiers ordered to kill had often aimed their rifles and only pretended to pull the trigger. Go back far enough in time and there were wars where over half the soldiers refused to kill. That was how difficult it was for a human to kill another human.

"That girl is used to the modern clean wars. She has a detailed flowchart used to accept all of the killing she does. We made her that way. But that means she'll stall if she comes across some code not in the script. Just like carrying a weapon in the city streets, the guilt of killing will stop her from acting! These people were aware of that flowchart, so they chose to throw away their own lives to bring about an invisible effect!!"

Precision machinery could not handle an unexpected situation, even if it was only a minute discrepancy.

She could understand a desperate enemy that continued fighting even after knowing they could not win.

But she could not process a battle fought to die and not to live. One where the enemy was prepared to lose their lives in vain and where mutual destruction was the best possible result they could hope for.

And so she would stop.

It was really only a difference in perception and both scenarios involved people betting their lives on their fight.

Something had driven these people to think this one-way trip strategy was their best option. That fact stabbed deep into the softest part of the human heart like a fish hook and the sharp barb kept it from being removed so it could continue causing pain.

If the enemy had simply entrusted their fates to outdated weapons and charged in with no thought to the difference in firepower, she would only have pitied them.

If they had the control system's remodeled to make unmanned hovercraft, she could have cursed them for being cowards.

But this was different.

It left a much larger and more definitive scar on her heart than any of the actual damage.

(Where did they dig up the plans for something like this? I hope it wasn't my country again.)

Physically, they could not win.

The difference in military power was overwhelming and the technologies the two sides were using were on completely different levels. No amount of equipment would get them through to their opponent.

And so they pleaded to the human heart.

They would win this war through the heart.

That alone may have sounded like a strategy born from the good of mankind, but they had rearranged it into this bloodstained method.

By highlighting the sin of killing and placing human death before her eyes, they would crush the girl's psyche.

"If she stops now, we'll be wiped out," warned Frolaytia. "Do you have any good ideas? I want some advice from the one person the Princess has opened her heart to."

"We have tanks and armored trucks for guarding the surrounding area, right? Send them all out!"

"Those can't replace the laser beams! If we use them to intercept those hovercraft charging in like cruise missiles, plenty of them will slip through!"

"What matters is that we show her we're fighting alongside her! It's just like pairing a spotter with a sniper. If we distribute responsibility, we can lessen the weight of killing that's bearing

down on her. Our part of the fight doesn't have to be particularly effective! We just have to stabilize her vitals!!"

It was only an illusion.

It was a lot like a formless placebo effect.

It was an untested last resort of unknown effectiveness that they could only keep up for an unknown amount of time.

But if it failed, there would be definite sacrifices.

If the hovercraft made into manned missiles were allowed through, the maintenance base zone would be destroyed.

"This is all that's left."

Newsmaker wiped sweat from his brow with a tool in one hand.

He had destroyed all of the computers filled with dangerous data and he had burned all of the paper documents hidden in the ceiling. That only left the data remaining in the large machine tool. That mass of steel filled most of the factory, so he did not have time to carry it to the blast furnace by crane. He used a screwdriver to open the cover and pulled out only the pieces of the circuit board needed for the important memory. He knew the factory better than anyone, so only he could have done this job. He could not afford to leave it to a subordinate and have something missed.

He broke the circuit board in two like a chocolate bar.

He now had no reason to stay here, so he brought his radio to his mouth.

"Are any of the Flying Fish left? I'll head out too. These finishing touches are absolutely necessary."

What truly mattered was not whether they destroyed the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone or not.

In fact, the odds were good they would fail there.

And even if they did cause some damage, it would not be enough to make the Object retreat.

Their objective lay elsewhere.

“I won’t let it end here. We will have our form of victory. The defeat of the Crown of the Northern Lights will lead to the Sixth Branch.”

Part 10

Quenser and the others paled when Frolaytia informed them that intercepting the manned missile hovercraft was wearing down the Princess's psyche.

"Are they insane? Are they trying to turn the clean wars in the exact opposite direction!?"

"There's the standard army, navy, and air force and then the marines as the fourth branch of the military. Lately, space development and cyber-warfare have been suggested as candidates for a fifth branch, but this isn't any of those. They've gone even further."

This was different from the simple information warfare used by the intelligence division.

Their tactics offensively used manipulation of morale and management of battlefield stress.

"This is a sixth branch of the military. They've made a unit to fight in the 'tiny world' inside the human heart."

"We're doing our best to lessen the burden, but it's only a stopgap measure," said Frolaytia. "Take control of that factory and stop this attack as soon as possible. If the Princess's psyche gives out, you won't have anywhere to return to!!"

Some Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers waved over from a short distance away. They had apparently found a useable hovercraft among the capsized ones. Quenser's group paddled through the mud using pieces of armor as body boards.

The light weight and small size of the hovercraft came in handy.

The deep marsh made it difficult, but with a dozen of them, they managed to flip the boat back over. The Crocodile Gatling gun was covered in mud and useless, but the rear propulsion fan was

working.

They climbed on and got the boat moving.

They were exceeding the hovercraft's maximum capacity, but they still used it to reach the copied weapons factory.

"Here they come! Look out up ahead!! It's those manned missile hovercraft!!"

"Wait, don't shoot them! We'll be caught in the blast!! Let them pass and continue toward the factory. For now, just get down!!"

The weapons passed by like solid gusts of wind.

The enemy machineguns roared, but their hovercraft were moving at over 800 kph. They had no way to aim accurately and only punctured the mud like a giant sewing machine.

Heivia raised his head, looked back, and spoke.

"Did you see that, Quenser?"

"The rocket nozzle didn't have any adjustable wings and it can't adjust its speed. Once those things ignite, they'll take you to the moon or wherever else they're pointed."

The enemy had been unable to reproduce missiles, so they had attached rocket motors to hovercraft.

They had been unable to create rocket engines with adjustable thrust, so they had used an incomplete product.

The end result looked like a piece of junk, but that actually gave it more exposed humanity. The sight overturned the current system of war that protected the people who controlled the murderous machines that digitally dealt out death.

"This isn't even a war anymore…"

"They aren't an officially registered army and they aren't protected by the international treaties. They're trying to create a new

framework or something.”

The enemy was focusing on the maintenance base zone because their goal was to force the Object to intercept, not to destroy the base. They had barely sent any hovercraft out to intercept the approaching soldiers.

“Wait, does that mean what I think it does?”

“Let’s do what we can. Turning back to the maintenance base won’t help us protect the Princess.”

The swamp came to an end.

They crossed the thick concrete embankment like it was a ramp. Beyond, they found a facility covered in asphalt like an airfield, but it had no runways or aircraft. There was an open space large enough for a soccer game in the center and buildings larger than port warehouses were lined up around it. A salty smell filled the air, so the freezing sea had to be nearby.

Quenser and Heivia jumped out of the slowed hovercraft and landed on the hard but stable ground. They had never imagined something so normal and expected could feel so reliable.

Heivia used his muddy hands to display an offline map on his handheld device.

“We have twenty people here, so let’s split into groups of four and check through the buildings one at a time! One group for the production facilities, one for the warehouses, one for the port, one for the residential area, and one to protect the hovercraft. If we lose that, we can’t escape the factory. I don’t know what’s going to happen, so protect it with your life!!”

“Heivia, how do we tell the production facilities from the warehouses?”

“The ones with smokestacks are probably the factories. We’re checking them all either way, so it doesn’t matter if you get it wrong a few times.”

The soldiers quickly got to work and Quenser stuck with Heivia.

“Hey, Heivia, about what you almost said earlier…”

“Yeah, it’s too quiet. It’s not that I *want* a welcome party, but I don’t want to find the place empty either.”

The factory was divided into a few different sections. Some buildings were full of machine tools and lathes like a downtown workshop and others were equipped with blast furnaces. It mostly seemed set up for handmade work, so there were none of the conveyer belts and robot arms of automobile or semiconductor factories. The place seemed dangerous enough for a major accident to occur at any time.

Also, there was no one there.

The warmth and smells of people remained in the empty space, so they felt like they had stumbled into a bizarre story about a ghost ship.

“Did they all already escape?”

“Don’t be stupid. There had to have been more than a hundred people living in a facility this big. Even with a submarine for smuggling stuff in and out, it wouldn’t be some giant missile submarine. With the kind of civilian sub used by criminals, they’d be lucky to fit twenty onboard.”

“Then…”

“Just as I’d feared, they’ve all gone out to attack! They’re pretending they’re some sixth branch of the military and using those manned missiles!! Shit!!”

They then heard an explosion from outside. The factory windows were double-pane to keep out the cold, but they shattered from the shockwave. Heivia held his ears, grimaced, and shouted again.

“What is it now, dammit!?”

“Sorry,” said someone over the radio. “I found that command

vehicle that controls the antiaircraft guns, so I blew it up. The explosion was bigger than I expected, though."

"Damn, he stole the best part," muttered Quenser as he regretfully stroked his pouch of electric fuses.

They exited the building and saw black smoke rising. The source had apparently been a six-wheeled armored vehicle with TV antennae covering every surface.

The soldier who had blown it up spoke triumphantly over the radio.

"Let's search the warehouses now."

"Hey, wait a second. If the advance team is going to do everything, why are the rest of us even here? Just let us sleep in at the base instead!!"

Heivia complained while also heading to one of the warehouses, but Quenser was messing with his handheld device. The soldiers already inside the building were sharing the footage from their helmet cameras.

The space was large enough to hold an entire school building and it was packed full of countless "products". The weapons contained inside were an odd mix. There were old-fashioned tanks, armored vehicles, piles of assault rifles, and all sorts of shells. There was even a helicopter that had been thrown inside half-constructed. They may not have been able to reproduce all of the technology necessary.

Quenser spoke as he ran along the runway-like asphalt.

"The source and technology level of these weapons are all over the place. It looks like they tried to reproduce every single design they could get their hands on. I guess this is what happens when you rely on existing plans without building up your technology from scratch."

This was not a simple case of being at too low a level.

With the antiaircraft guns and the thermobaric rounds, even some

excellent weapons had been left inside this toy box.

“Look, Heivia. There’s even an electromagnetic pulse weapon. There hasn’t been any news of that prototype since it was announced at a weapons show a few years back. How did they steal the plans for that?”

“Wait, please tell me that isn’t the thing where they trigger a nuclear explosion in the atmosphere to fry all of a nation’s electronics! That doesn’t have a nuclear warhead, does it!?”

Heivia’s eyes widened, but Quenser remained calm.

Or rather, he feigned calm while growing excited in a different way.

“No one would even indirectly use nuclear tech in the age of Objects. It’s a meteorological weapon called an Elefish.”

“A meteorological weapon? That sounds fancy, but wouldn’t it just be something like dry ice or silver iodide? By changing the atmospheric pressure with an extreme temperature difference, you can change the density of the clouds and cause rain, but how do you make an electromagnetic pulse weapon out of that?”

“This thing scatters a ton of metal foil in the clouds to induce consecutive lightning strikes on a level you’d never see in nature. If I remember right, it can cause about twenty seconds of sustained discharge and even lightning causes an electromagnetic pulse.”

“Twenty seconds? That’s not even enough time to make instant noodles. Can you really fry a military network with that?”

“Heivia, even multiple lightning strikes in nature only last about 0.2 seconds. This is two hundred times as much and the power of the electromagnetic pulse it causes is even more. The surge of electricity will apparently destroy any semiconductors over an area of ten kilometers. If the specs I’ve seen are accurate, it will blow away an entire city’s infrastructure: power, water, sewage, gas, TV, phones, internet, etc. It would bring about a new ecological society without electricity.”

However, modern military weaponry was built with

countermeasures for electromagnetic pulses. Their cables were shielded and some of their semiconductors were inside vacuum tubes. Objects in particular would never have their internal circuitry fried because they had been designed for absolute victory over the nuclear age.

“Clear.”

“The west end is clear too! No readings on my sensors!!”

Voices spoke over the footage on the handheld device and the multiple cameras finally started converging on the center of the warehouse.

Computers were stacked up on a work bench. There was also everything from cellphones to some kind of circuit boards piled up all over the bench.

“They’ve all been destroyed.”

“Can they be repaired?” suggested Quenser. “We could hand them over to the electronic simulation division or the intelligence division.”

“We’ll retrieve them of course, but it doesn’t look good. They were opened up and molten metal was pumped inside.”

Only one screen had light coming from it. The soldiers dug it out and found a cheap laptop computer. It had no disk drive or hard disk, so it seemed to run off of flash memory. The entire thing was as small as a handbag.

“What is that?” asked Quenser.

“We’re checking. …It looks like most of the initial settings are intact. There’s only been a single video file added and it’s already been accessed.”

The soldier on the screen messed with the laptop and moved the video player’s slider along to play just the important parts of the file that was only a few minutes long.

Watching a laptop screen through his handheld device felt strange.

The video file seemed to have been filmed with a small handheld camera.

The shaky footage was of the factory grounds they had seen earlier. The only difference was the line of hovercraft equipped with rocket motors.

“We will leave this manual for the future. This message is meant for all of our latent comrades trapped in the quagmire of war around the world. Today, the Crown of the Northern Lights will challenge a new weakness in the Objects that rule our current age and we will guide us all to a certain result. This will lead to your age. Make full use of the psychological warfare we will present to you and create for yourselves a Sixth Branch of the military. Your righteous view is sure to bring this world back onto the right path.”

The situation gradually sank in.

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance outside.

“This is bad. Has this already been transmitted!? This thing is revealing the plans for those manned missile hovercraft!!”

“If this place is empty, where did their leader…what was he called? Newsmaker? Where did he go!? We can’t have him follow through with this and die. That will only spread this idea of a Sixth Branch of the military. They’ve hit the switch for that!!”

“If he dies and is viewed as a martyr, we’ll never be able to stop this. Everyone will stop fighting to live and will start fighting to die. How can we stop this?”

“We have to capture him alive. I just don’t know how to do that!!”

The enemy did not need to win.

They only needed to leave behind the fact that they fought the Object and died in a blaze of glory.

Their deaths would place pressure on the Pilot Elite Princess and

lead her to a mental breakdown. And if the so-called “latent comrades” viewed that as a success, similar attacks would be made against Objects all around the world.

Those ultra high-speed weapons were a one-way ticket.

The Sixth Branch would use aircraft, vehicles, and ships packed full of shells and rocket fuel and those outdated weapons would be used to crush the psyches of the maintenance base zones and Pilot Elites.

“No, wait,” said the soldier on the handheld device. “The time of the upload to the video site doesn’t make sense. It was only a few minutes ago.”

“Couldn’t it have been set to automatically upload?”

“There’s no timer on this thing. It was uploaded after we arrived at the factory, so Newsmaker must still be-…”

The soldier trailed off.

The targeting lens of a hovercraft blending into the background behind him had made a whirring noise.

Part 11

Quenser and Heivia watched on as the warehouse's front metal shutter was blown away in an explosion.

"Oh, hell! Hide!!"

Heivia yelled a warning, grabbed Quenser's arm, and dove between two warehouses.

The Gatling gun on the manned missile hovercraft turned and started firing.

The metal warehouse walls and a forklift crumbled like styrofoam. The two idiots could only lie on the ground and cover the back of their heads with their hands as they waited for the storm of lead to pass. They could not even raise their head.

"What was that!? The Newsmaker guy!?"

"The big boss always sticks around to the end. More importantly, Heivia, can you target the hovercraft's float? Pop that balloon and he'll stop. And if we end this charge on the Princess, their proof of the Sixth Branch will fail!"

"You're kidding, right? It'll have aramid fibers woven in to make it bulletproof! Besides, I'll be killed if I raise my head now!!"

"Then what about a missile!?"

"I don't have any left! How about you throw a bomb!?"

As they argued, fire burst from the thick metal tube on the back of the hovercraft and an explosive sound followed.

A few Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were attempting to chase after Newsmaker, but that was enough to knock them a few meters back.

"Dammit! He's getting away!!"

The hovercraft surpassed 100 kph in only a few seconds.

It left the copied weapons factory grounds in no time and made its way out into the seemingly endless marsh. The shrinking dot was clearly moving too fast to catch up to on foot.

When Heivia finally poked his head out from between the warehouses, he gave an irritated shout.

“What the hell are we supposed to do!? That thing’s a hunk of liquid fuel and shells moving at 800 kph. We can’t catch up and the Object is sure to kill him. But if we don’t attack and it reaches the maintenance base zone, it’s all over. The path to the Sixth Branch will open either way. So what are we supposed to do!?”

“…”

Quenser fell silent and looked around the crumbled warehouses.

“Heivia and everyone else, is any of the heavy machinery still working? I want to drag an antiaircraft gun out from one of the warehouses.”

“What good is that!?”

“Remember the electromagnetic pulse weapon we saw in the footage from the group who went in first? We’ll fire that with the antiaircraft gun. With that Elefish in the clouds, we can fry the circuit boards of that manned missile hovercraft! If it stalls, we can capture him without killing him!!”

They all began moving immediately.

The antiaircraft guns were attached to the back of canopy-less midsized trucks, making them look like dangerous tow trucks, but there was no gasoline in those left in the warehouses to rot.

Heivia drove a different truck up, attached the two vehicles with wires, and towed one out. Quenser and four others worked together to carry the 10cm wide and 90 cm long shell. They only realized afterwards they could have used the truck to carry the shell out too.

They were all in a state of confusion.

“We only have one shot with the Elefish! If we mess up, it’s all over!!”

“Then let’s test fire with a normal shell first. We need to see how this thing fires!!”

Heivia shouted back that suggestion while climbing onto the back of the truck to operate the gun.

That was when a female soldier asked a hesitant question.

“Um, do we even know where Newsmaker is?”

“Oh, goddammit.”

That most basic of facts had slipped their minds.

This swamp continued for one hundred kilometers in every direction. They knew the enemy was traveling from the factory to the maintenance base zone, but they did not know his exact course. They could only pray he had not arrived yet.

And the Elefish electromagnetic pulse meteorological weapon only had an effective range of approximately ten kilometers. That was enough to swallow up an entire city, but it could not cover this vast swamp.

That was not something they could do from the ground, so Quenser brought his radio to his mouth.

“Frolaytia!! Is the satellite surveillance network back up yet!? We need to locate one manned missile hovercraft in particular. What is the electronic simulation division even doing!?”

“Wait… Those intellectuals are finally showing some results. If this works, we might just have our eyes in the sky back.”

That was good news.

If they could use the satellites, the odds were good they could end

this without killing Newsmaker.

Part 12

“Wait just a moment.”

A slender young man licked his lips in a part of the maintenance base zone where the air conditioning was on full blast year-round.

“I finally got permission to use the Cluster Brain. I won’t let them get in our way any longer. I’ll hack into the clone satellite system intruding on our military satellite and I’ll burn it up in the atmosphere.”

Even in her thick uniform, Frolaytia crossed her arms to stay warm.

She was irritated, but she had learned through experience that forcing this sort through physical training only made their performance worse. Letting them do what they wanted was the most effective method, even if she hated it.

“So do we have the satellite back?”

“The Cluster Brain is a special high-speed server built for the Legitimacy Kingdom’s cyber operations. Well, to give away the secret, it’s a 45.5 kilobyte piece of spyware slipped into the base OS for the smartphones and tablets selling like hotcakes back in the safe countries. The excess processing power of over seven hundred billion devices is parallelized and used for our analysis work. It’s a pain in the ass to get permission to use it since it would be really bad if this was discovered, but now that I have that permission…”

“Do we have the satellite back or not?”

“I can break through any defenses with brute force!! See!?”

Tons of windows started appearing on the LCD screen, but Frolaytia did not understand what any of the alphanumeric strings meant.

The young man seemed to think his division would be reduced if their results were not recognized, so his explanation was much more eloquent than necessary.

“This is the inside of the clone satellite’s brain. I can shut it down, send it plunging into the atmosphere, or trace who’s been sending it commands. Now, where should I start? Maybe I should visit the sites the bastard visits the most. Who knows, we might learn how to raise a cat.”

“Recovering our surveillance network comes first. I don’t care if they notice. Just stop the interference with our signals.”

“Roger that, roger tha-…”

The young man trailed off and his smile froze over.

New windows filled the screen and even Frolaytia could tell that venomously red text was bad news.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me… This is bad.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, hell. I can’t pin it down… I can’t seem to pin it down, but that clone satellite must have had a virus in it! This is what they were after this whole time. They infected the cracking system and entered the Legitimacy Kingdom’s military network from there!! Shit. Who would go this far!?”

“Don’t make me say it again! What happened!?”

When she shouted at him from close range, the young man finally gave up and confessed.

“Contact HQ right away and have them change the Object emergency shutdown codes.”

“What?”

“They’ve stolen all of them!! If we don’t hurry, they’ll shut down Baby Magnum’s reactor!!”

A quiet electronic tone beeped.

The woman known as Yog-Sothoth tried to pull a fancy little device from her skiwear's coat pocket, found she could not with the thick glove on her hand, and removed the glove before trying again.

Once she looked at the screen, she found she finally had some results.

"When you challenge the All-Knowing and recklessly peer into the abyss, you will always meet your doom upon facing the cruel truth. …That is the standard when coming into contact with the Outer Gods."

Thanks to the line between the clone satellite, the cracking server system, and the military network, more and more Legitimacy Kingdom military secrets were pouring into Yog-Sothoth's personal online storage.

When she spotted the emergency shutdown code for the First Generation sent here, her eyes narrowed a little.

(If I had gotten this earlier, I could have ended this without any bloodshed.)

The best-case scenario had been obtaining this information via the clone satellite back when the Legitimacy Kingdom was under attack by the tanks and armored trucks submerged in the swamp.

Unfortunately, the soldiers had cleverly broken through without waiting for the satellite to recovery.

When their attempt to scare the enemy had failed, Newsmaker and his men had switched to their "original plan" of psychological warfare using the manned missiles.

Where had she gone wrong?

What could she have done differently to reach that best-case scenario?

"No."

At that point, Yog-Sothoth shook her head.

(I can't let that distract me right now. I need to think about what I can still do instead of just regretting the past.)

She had the emergency shutdown code now.

A great number of Flying Fish manned missile hovercraft were charging toward the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone.

The enemy's lifeline had to be the Object's laser weapons.

So if the Object were shutdown, they would sink into a sea of explosions. That would establish the methodology of the Sixth Branch that attacked people's psyches and it would destroy the current Object-reliant world. The world powers would begin using similar methods and the age would abandon the wars fought to live and begin wars fought to die.

That result had not been stopped.

In that case, what could Yog-Sothoth do?

Would she silence the impregnable wall of the Object so their determined deaths would not be in vain?

"…"

She looked down at the device's LCD screen.

And with a single finger, she decided the course of history.

Part 13

Frolaytia sent a shrill report and Quenser's group also felt like just giving up.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!! We were hit by a cyber attack *now*!? We can't locate Newsmaker without the satellite, so this electromagnetic pulse weapon is going to go to waste!!"

They could not rely on their allies.

If they did not know where the manned missile hovercraft carrying Newsmaker was, they could not stop him.

Was there nothing they could do?

This was a focused attack on the psyche of the Object's Pilot Elite. If the manned missiles were deemed effective, more would attempt the same thing, but could they stop that from happening?

"Wait," muttered Quenser. "Frolaytia, please give me some information!! There might still be something we can do. And where's that laptop we found in the warehouse? Bring that over here!!"

The student placed the laptop on the asphalt after a soldier handed it to him. The soldiers naturally gathered around as Quenser focused on the designs of the manned missile hovercraft displayed after the proclamation.

(I need to find a bargaining chip and there might be something in here. Focus as hard as you can and find it!!)

"Quenser, what kind of information do you want?" asked Frolaytia over the radio. "We're about to seal off all our data, so access to the military network will be limited. If you have a request, make it now!!"

"It's simple," he succinctly answered. "You just have to tell me Yog-Sothoth's address from when she was in the Legitimacy Kingdom!!"

Yog-Sothoth frowned at the characters displayed on the screen.

Odds were good it was a trap.

After a thorough inspection, she opened a voice app and answered.

“Who is this?”

“You must be the type to drag your past around with you if you kept this old address around. Or did you not have time to clean up the contents of your computer?”

“Legitimacy Kingdom, you won’t be able to trace my location by dragging out this conversation.”

“I never expected to pull off something like that against someone skilled enough to hack into the core of the military network.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to stop Newsmaker. Alive of course. So give us back our satellite surveillance network.”

“…”

She fell silent.

She understood all too well how Newsmaker’s group felt. She knew just how oppressed you were if you did not have an Object or were not allowed to join a group that had one.

She also understood how the Legitimacy Kingdom military felt. This would spread beyond their unit. If they handled this wrong, an age would bloom in which both enemy and ally drowned in bloodshed.

She gave the issue deep thought before answering.

“Why do you think I would help you? I assume you know who I actually am.”

“I saw the plans for those manned missile hovercraft. You couldn’t make those with the technological level of the copied weapons

factory. The electronic controls in particular require software in addition to the hardware. Without a skilled IT person, they'd be stuck with the preset defaults."

"…"

"You brought the factory a copy of plans for an 'invisible bomb' with high level stealth functionality, didn't you? Those allowed for laser guidance, so were you originally planning to use those guidance chips to give them a safe and unmanned guided weapon? But they didn't wait around and were satisfied with the manned missiles. You were trying to repay them, but you instead sealed their fates! I doubt that was what you expected to happen here!"

“That’s nothing but speculation. You have no objective proof of that alleged good will.”

“If these were originally designed as manned weapons, then some of the space is unnecessary and a few of the circuits take odd detours. Almost like there was a spot meant to hold a guidance chip. I’m an aspiring engineer, so I can look at those designs and see where things were changed.”

Yog-Sothoth let out a deep sigh.

She felt a little dizzy and looked at the thick clouds covering the sky.

“I can’t understand what made them so happy.”

“They might have been smiling, but if they’re raised to the level of martyrs, their families and children will be placed on that same line. A Sixth Branch that surpasses space warfare or cyber warfare shouldn’t be made and shouldn’t see the light of day! That goes beyond what war should be!!”

She listened to him speak.

Her eyes wavered, as did the fingertips prepared to operate the screen.

“Please.”

He sounded on the verge of tears.

“Please!! I need your help to stop the turning point Newsmaker wants to create!!”

He likely had no time to spare, but Yog-Sothoth closed her eyes for just a moment.

When she reopened them, she asked a question.

“Enough of the tear-jerking performance. What’s your real reason? Why do you want to stop Newsmaker this badly?”

“The Elite on that Object is…”

He hesitated to continue but forced out the words.

And that was his answer.

“A girl I’m interested in. I don’t want her to go down in history as the person who helped bring about this turning point.”

Yog-Sothoth swore.

This softness and these emotions that could not be fully digitized and she knew they could appear to be an evil god indiscriminately spreading fear and chaos when objectively viewed by a third party.

Part 14

After a few quiet beeps, the maps on Quenser, Heivia, and the other soldiers' devices were updated. The amount of available information increased in the blink of an eye. The many dots charging toward the maintenance base zone were the manned missile hovercraft and each individual dot included information from a more thorough scan.

It did not go to the level of facial recognition, but locating the leader was simple enough by checking the amount of equipped weaponry and determining which hovercraft was most defended by their formation.

"Quensie!? What was that just now? D-don't tell me you're really working on winning over the Princess!"

"Kyah! I only said I was interested! That's all!! Besides, this really isn't the time to be getting into that!!"

If Newsmaker completed his attack while they descended into what amounted to the late-night gossip of a school trip, it would all be for naught.

They all looked like they wanted to say something, but they focused on the antiaircraft gun on the back of the truck.

"I don't think we have time for a test firing with a normal warhead. Shove the electromagnetic pulse weapon in there!!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! Are we seriously turning those wheels to manually aim? We might only have to launch the thing up into those thick clouds, but still!"

"He's at the very back… Even with a rocket motor, it takes time to get up to speed. He's between five and six thousand meters away. Thirty-five degrees is as low as we can go, so we can still make it now!!"

“You set the timed fuse based on the distance and initial speed. This would be meaningless if the shell detonates after breaking through the clouds!!”

“The shell has been loaded!!”

“Distance: 3200. Angle of elevation: 41. Let’s shove this thing up the ass of the goddess napping on those clouds. Open your mouth and plug your ears! Fire!!”

With an explosive blast, the shockwave knocked Quenser over as he tried to get away from the gun.

The firing powder making up most of the shell was entirely burned up inside the gun and the rugby ball-sized bullet shot toward the thick clouds in the distance. Or they assumed it did. It was not a tracer round that emitted its own light, so Quenser and Heivia could not see it with their naked eyes.

“Did it…work?”

Just as Quenser asked that of no one in particular, the clouds exploded quite spectacularly.

It became an overwhelming vortex of electricity that could never exist in nature.

Meanwhile, Newsmaker heard the fierce explosion overhead. The earsplitting roar sounded like the staticky noise of salt water poured into a neon tube amplified more than one hundred times over. The roar of the rocket motor should have ruled the world of sound outside the thick canopy, but even that was torn apart as the strange vortex of noise assaulted Newsmaker.

There was no lightning strike.

The electrical discharge remained in the clouds, but it was powerful enough to nearly scatter the clouds themselves. As if a meteor had exploded in midair, the flash of light overhead was so intense that his vision was dyed white.

And a moment later…

“Wha-?”

It was like a switch had been thrown.

All of the electronic systems inside his Flying Fish manned missile hovercraft malfunctioned.

He detected the unpleasant odor of melting plastic coming from somewhere, but he soon realized that was the least of his worries.

The uncontrollable hovercraft did not come to an immediate stop. The rocket motor continued spewing flames, but the hovercraft floating on the mud was taken out first. It sank into the mud and gradually lost speed, but it had no way of avoiding any obstacles. It soon crashed into the turret of one of the tanks his group had placed there. The thick canopy broke, he heard the sound of his seatbelt buckle breaking, and he was thrown out. The bonds of useless seatbelt had already broken bones across his body by the time he was tossed into the air.

And then he rolled again and again across the mud.

Unable to sink, he skipped across the surface like a stone on a river.

He did not even have the strength to scream.

Finally, he came to a stop on top of the thick swamp. He tried to breath in some air, but he had trouble. He had stopped at an extremely shallow area, his arms and legs refused to move, and he may have broken his back or hip. The most he could manage was slowly move one arm.

Would he let himself sink into the swamp and die?

Or would he pull his handgun from its holster and use it?

(Either way, I’m not allowed to die in battle.)

He hesitated only for an instant.

Newsmaker pulled the gun from its holster and pressed it to his temple while ignoring his sinking body.

(Still, I will end this on the battlefield. I won't let this end with an accidental death after coming this far!!)

He was no longer focused on the actions of an individual.

His focus was on ensuring the group known as the Crown of the Northern Lights achieved a certain result against the Pilot Elite. Part of that was for him to die in battle. That alone would be an effective message and it would set the creation of the Sixth Branch in motion.

And so…

But that was when he heard the repeated gunfire of a rifle.

His arm was utterly destroyed as if by a giant sewing machine. Not only did he drop the gun, he lost everything past the elbow. As he groaned, he finally realized it had been gunfire from a soldier leaning out from a transport helicopter.

Synthetic fiber ropes were dropped from either side of the hovering helicopter and fully-equipped soldiers descended.

A female soldier's voice came from the speaker attached to the helicopter.

"I have a message from the All-Knowing."

They showed little concern for him.

As long as they captured him alive in some fashion, they assumed they could keep the switch for the turning point from being thrown.

"She says she sympathizes with your ideology, but she cannot turn a blind eye to your methods. She says there is meaning in spreading that ideology through peaceful means."

Part 15

“Over here, over here.”

After watching the conclusion in the flow of data, Yog-Sothoth turned toward a male voice.

The cold ocean was still covered in ice, but one spot was broken. Poking up through that spot was the kind of smuggling submarine used by criminal organizations to transport weapons, drugs, and the humans to be their products.

It was not a military model, so it was colored blue with yellow lines like some unsold basketball shoes sitting on the store shelf.

The man who had spoken had his upper body sticking out of the top hatch and he waved cheerfully toward Yog-Sothoth.

“I can’t get any closer. I know it’s scary, but you need to walk across the ice.”

She did as told and arrived at the submarine in her skiwear.

The inside was surprisingly roomy. It had enough space to hold a small truck and that was probably why it had been chosen for smuggling.

“I sent up an antenna buoy for communications, so I know the situation. It’s a shame what happened to Newsmaker.”

The man started speaking as the submarine dove below the ice. There did not seem to be any other crew, so he must have been able to control it all on his own.

“I’ll take you to the Alaska district battlefield country. I don’t care what you do then.”

“Thanks.”

Yog-Sothoth leaned against the wall instead of sitting on the floor.

“Newsmaker and the Crown of the Northern Lights were wiped out, so why did you still pick me up?”

“They paid me some up front, so I’ll do enough to cover that. I’m a professional after all,” simply said the man. “Also, Newsmaker accomplished the bare minimum, so I need to reward him for that.”

“?”

“Of course, defeating the Object by successfully destroying the psyche of the Pilot Elite would have been best, but even the attempt will make the military panic. What mattered was getting the term ‘Sixth Branch’ out there. The Capitalist Corporations, Legitimacy Kingdom, Faith Organization, and Information Alliance are probably going to be in a rush to work together and put out this fire. That’s exactly what we wanted. I’ll make sure to help with what comes next.”

“Wait a second. What are you even talking about?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to right now?”

The man calmly turned around.

The gentle and cheerful atmosphere had utterly vanished. Instead, he had delicate but disturbing features that were realistic yet awkward, like a doll with thin rubber coating it.

Only then did Yog-Sothoth catch on.

This was the result of undergoing cosmetic surgery again and again, allowing the slight marks to accumulate. It all looked fine normally, but when the facial muscles moved too much, a distortion became apparent.

“Members of the Outer Gods do not know the identities of the other members. They only know the organization exists and that they are a part of it. It is the most secret and most unique intelligence agency within the Capitalist Corporations.”

“You don’t mean…”

“The information only ever moves in a single direction. The superiors know all about who works below them, but the reverse never happens. The older members know all about the new members, but the reverse never happens. Do you understand now?”

“You don’t mean…!!”

A certain possibility finally occurred to Yog-Sothoth.

Newsmaker and the Crown of the Northern Lights had saved her, but what if they had been unwittingly assisting some other project entirely?

What if a world power had been trying to bring chaos to their enemies by supporting a terrorist or guerrilla group as they often did?

A deep, rubbery smile appeared on the face of this man who was in even deeper than her.

“I’m Nyarlathotep. Nice to meet you, newcomer.”

That was an evil god said to have a thousand faces.

It was the name of a trickster that used great malice and an icy smile to drive everything toward chaos and despair.

Chapter 2: Rapidly Growing Conspiracy Theory > > Joint Military Exercise in the Kariba District

Part 1

The multinational group military exercise known as Gigant Hustler begins April 15 in the South African battlefield country of the Kariba District!!

“This is insane.”

The Princess muttered to herself while taking a break from preparing for a real war by staring at the posters covering the Object maintenance area’s wall.

Several Objects and the green savanna grasslands of the April rainy season acted as the poster backgrounds and a sexy idol gave an exaggerated wink while aiming a handgun gesture straight out from the poster.

The Princess repeated herself as a shell supported by wires was slowly moved by heavy machinery groaning so loudly it sounded like the end of the world had come.

“This is completely insane.”

“This was the only way.” The old maintenance lady cut in with a sigh in her voice while using her index finger to send instructions out over her tablet device. “Objects are the symbol of war and there are eight of them here. That means eight monsters have gathered in a single spot to wage war. Without manipulating the information like this, the safe countries would think a world war was starting and social unrest would run rampant.”

In other words, the “exercise” was a front for a true battle to the death.

If a single shell strayed into the stands, the entire area would be soaked red.

“And this Gigant Hustler thing is a giant farce in the first place,”

complained the Princess.

“That just shows how much the higher ups of the world powers are afraid of this Sixth Branch that specializes in psychological warfare. If its effectiveness spreads, the entire clean war structure will crumble. If people like them start showing up in the safe countries, they won’t be safe in the slightest. So the world powers have prepared this major event to drown out the historical impact. Basically, they want to put out this fire as soon as possible.”

Some young maintenance soldiers carrying toolboxes passed behind the two of them. The portable disaster radios and 1seg TVs hanging from their necks provided a mixture of cheerful voices.

The event had grown well beyond a mere joint military exercise.

One radio was giving a grand celebration from the surprise visit of a Capitalist Corporations VIP.

“Four weapons shows are being held in the surroundings of the Gigant Hustler. And now Acre Kiss-of-Rose, CEO of Salem Logistics, one of the 7th Core corporations that control the Capitalist Corporations home country, has made a surprise visit, so speculation abounds that some major defense contract negotiations are underway.”

One TV was announcing the online concert of an Information Alliance idol Elite.

“Ho ho ho. Oh ho ho ho ho ho!! Welcome to the Stardust Concert where the stars fall on the stage! Let’s enjoy this night below the full screen of a meteor shower!! Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!!”

“This is insane…” repeated the Princess as she gently brought a hand to her forehead.

The Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization had sent in a total of eight Objects for a major battle there. It resembled a scene from the end of the world or some kind of ultimate showdown, yet the higher ups had thoroughly diluted the sense of fear and danger.

As a result, everyone was treating it like a giant festival. Countless clusters of food stands and several concert halls had been haphazardly set up around the maintenance bases, several weapons shows and concerts were underway, and temporary tent hotels filled the savanna to house the more than two million people who had showed up from safe countries.

And yet none of them knew what turn this battle was going to take.

None of them could predict when a stray shell would fly their way from the eight-Object melee.

Part 2

“The Princess needs some mental stabilization. Quenser, you go show her around ‘downtown’. We can’t have her grogginess get worse and send her into a gloomy bout of war-weariness.”

Even if the place was called a desert, it was not covered with scorching sand and giant pyramids.

The rain of the rainy season had cleared up, so the entire area was covered in short green grass. It looked something like a pasture without fences.

“…This really is insane.”

“Do you not like crowds, Princess?”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

The Princess gave the “peaceful scenery” an icy look and she pouted her lips a little next to Quenser.

The vibrant grasslands were overflowing with a deluge of people, people, and more people. Makeshift stages with roofs and corporate display booths were set up here and there. The floors were polished like a new car and companion girls were standing next to the new weapons, showing off their white teeth in a smile and waving at passersby.

Everyone here thought the event was nothing more than a military exercise and a lot of them had used their precious vacation days to visit from a safe country.

Quenser and the Princess knew this was actually a great battle between eight Objects owned by all four major world powers, so the smiles surrounding them were bad for their hearts.

“They have new anti-materiel rifles and wheeled armored

vehicles?" commented Quenser. "Huh, so I guess there is a demand for normal, non-Object weapons."

"Objects are filled with national secrets, so they're all 'self-made'. I don't think you can run a business selling any of its parts."

"Is that how it works?"

"Everything here is for urban warfare where they can't send in an Object. That armored vehicle's design focuses on its light weight more than its defenses because they don't want to damage the roads or bridges."

Also, most of the companion girls were wearing outfits modeled after a Pilot Elite's special suit. The colors of their costumes were divided between blue, red, yellow, or green, depending on the world power they were affiliated with.

There were an awful lot of people dressed like that in the crowds too. It was not clear if that was for their job or just for fun, but it helped a real one like the Princess escape the strobe light of camera flashes that would have found her otherwise.

There was of course also a Legitimacy Kingdom bodyguard team blending into their surroundings.

"Come to think of it, there aren't very many unmanned weapons here," noted Quenser.

"They're afraid of cyber attacks. And if you use a powerful ECM, they can be brought down in enemy territory or an urban area."

Some booths had gone full circle and started showing off analog sights one could add to a gun. They were for "just in case" there was equipment trouble, a cyber attack, or an electromagnetic pulse.

"Part of me thinks there's something wrong when soldiers are worried about their cellphone battery, but I bet all this extra trouble is due to the military and the corporations working together a little too closely."

One booth was selling normal semiconductors as well as printed

circuit boards encased in tiny vacuum tubes as an electromagnetic pulse countermeasure. The advertisement tried to spread fear far more than necessary, so it reminded Quenser of how disaster goods were sold.

“That’s just how it is for the higher, higher, higher, higher ups,” said the Princess. “I don’t even want to think about how many backdoor deals go into the five billion dollar Objects.”

A sweet smell reached their noses.

Quenser followed the Princess’s gaze and found a rest space just outside the weapons booths. Stands selling ice cream, frappes, crepes, etc. were crammed in around it, but he grabbed her hand to stop her.

Even through her special glove, he could feel the unique marshmallow softness of a girl’s hand.

“Don’t forget that we’re in the middle of a war here. Who knows what’ll be mixed in with the food.”

“I didn’t have my heart that set on getting something to eat. Besides, I have my fridge and microwave back in the Object.”

Despite what she said, he had a feeling her lips were slightly pouted.

Then he felt her squeeze his hand back a little.

“Quenser.”

“What is it?”

“The maintenance soldiers told me something interesting. During the battle against the copied weapons factory…”

“?”

“D-did you really say I’m a ‘girl you’re int-…”

Suddenly, their conversation was cut off as something ran into

Quenser's back – or rather, near his butt.

Their hands were pulled apart.

"?"

Quenser looked back, but he only saw the never-ending crowd of people and could not tell who had bumped into him.

"Ahhhh!! Papa, everything around here's made of metal. It's so boring."

"Now, we can crunch out the exact numbers over there. Oh, and I forgot to introduce myself. I am Heavy Bullet Co.'s special out-of-store sales division representative. My name is…"

"Oh ho ho. Understood. I've finished with my detour, so I'll be right there."

(Hm? That voice…???)

He briefly felt a shudder run down his spine, but he did not have time to check on it.

As soon as their hands had parted, the Princess had started kicking at his shin.

"Wha-? Ow. Princ- Wait, that really hurts. Princess, I'm telling you that hurts!!"

"…"

The Princess had clearly reached her zone of displeasure.

The intelligence division contacted Frolaytia to tell her the Princess's fighting spirit had returned.

Part 3

After accomplishing his goal for the day, Quenser was thrown down to the bottom level of society along with Heivia. They had been sent out for training.

“I’d heard this was the rainy season, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a clearer sky. If only it’d start pouring. Then they might change the training menu.”

“They’re apparently using a meteorological weapon for the big event.”

“Tch. Then why can’t they just screw with the atmospheric pressure enough for a tornado or downburst to blow away the enemy maintenance bases?”

“There are plusses and minuses. The cheap silver iodide types apparently lead to soil contamination.”

Their full course of hell for the day was being held in the grassy plain far away from the weapons show booths. For some reason, it was being run by a female soldier wearing a chef’s hat instead of a helmet.

They looked around and found everyone else there had a similar background. That is, they had been labeled “problem soldiers”. That only made their bad feeling about this even worse.

Then the chef started speaking.

“Major Capistrano has made a wonderful order to celebrate our trip to Africa! Since you’re all so fat from your gourmet lifestyles, you get to learn some true survival skills! The basic rule of food is to eat everything that’s nontoxic and digestible!! Something being hard, bitter, smelly, or gross is not an acceptable excuse!! I will make sure to remind you that you are mere animals first and foremost and proud humans only second, so prepare yourselves!!”

The soldiers all perked up when they heard talk of food.

They were stuck eating rations that could only be described as erasers or soap, so some odd cuisine was not going to faze them. Present them with a tiger or a lion and they were prepared to chop it up and cook it. Anything on four legs looked like a meal to them.

“The soul of cooking is salt and oil. You may think of ‘roasted meat’ when someone mentions makeshift meals made on the battlefield, but that is often not enough to cover the texture, bitterness, and odor I mentioned earlier. That is what makes frying so good. Just like fries are as addictive as drugs and just like slimy octopus or squid fries up nice and crispy, frying fixes everything. Carry a metal pot if you have the room or just use a mug if you have to. Make sure to carry cooking oil at all times. And with that said…”

The chef soldier carried out a basket covered by a scarf.

For some reason, the scarf was wriggling a little bit.

“(Hey, what do you think’s in there?)”

“(Our ingredient. Maybe snakes or frogs? That’s not about to shock me at this point.)”

They were so hungry that they were beginning to suspect the tasteless soap-like rations were part of a masterplan to get the soldiers to go on suicide missions in exchange for a burger.

“Tah dah!! This is today’s ingredient!!”

The female soldier removed the scarf and revealed what was inside: crickets.

The entire basket was filled with a wriggling mass of shiny black insects.

“Byah!?”

“Are you insane!? Are you completely insane!? I can’t eat bugs! And these don’t look all that different from roaches! Not to mention that there isn’t meat inside them! It’s just some kind of weird juices!!”

Everyone here was a problem soldier charged with disobeying orders or negligence in their duties, so this was obviously meant as a punishment.

But the chef soldier put her hands on her hips and snorted proudly.

“Insects sit at the bottom of the food chain and they are an abundant source of protein that supports the entire ecosystem. And as long as they aren’t poisonous, they’re easy to obtain. You can eat the whole thing, so you don’t leave any bones or skins behind for enemy soldiers to find. …You just need to know how to make them taste good. Got that?”

She began preparing to show them how.

She started a fire without using a lighter, boiled the vegetable oil inside her metal pot, and dumped tons of live crickets inside.

“They’re really the same as fries. Fry them up and then add salt. When not using any batter, the trick to making them taste good is to apply plenty of moisture beforehand.”

“Oh, no. That sizzling really does sound like fries.”

“Stop that. I’ll never be able to eat fries again!!”

It was a teacher’s job to answer all of her students’ questions.

“If you don’t like how they look, you can crush them and roll them into a dumpling. Use about ten of them per dumpling.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d vomit at least three times in the process!! And is it just me or would this count as abuse in a safe country!?”

This recipe was meant to be made during military operations, so the fewer tools needed, the better. They used forks to scoop the crickets directly from the oil.

“They come out perfectly bite-sized.”

“They still look just like crickets.”

“But they sometimes stick together even when not using batter. See, like this one.”

“Ew, that is disgusting! Twenty of them have fused together into some kind of cookie!”

“By the way, this works for wasps and scorpions too. Even if they’re poisonous, that can be neutralized by the high heat. Of course, it isn’t a perfect method, so don’t put too much faith in it. And don’t even try mantises. They often have parasites, so I can’t recommend them to rookies.”

The cricket dishes were lined up in front of them.

The slimy black luster was gone, but they mostly maintained their original shape.

“You should be thankful for this gift from your battlefield chef. Follow my example and add this to your repertoire of skills. And don’t forget to say grace and follow your table manners like proper ladies and gentlemen.”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

They did not want to do this, but doing nothing would get them nowhere. Plus, the crickets were sure to taste even worse once they cooled, just like fries after they went cold and limp. If potatoes tasted that bad, they did not even want to know how bad crickets would get. Waiting would only increase the difficulty level of this hellish ordeal.

“I guess we just have to bite the bullet.”

“Let’s eat them together. On the count of three.”

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

“Zero… I knew you weren’t going to eat it!! You were gonna have

me eat it first as your little guinea pig, weren't you!?"

"You waited too, Heivia!! So stop making me out like the only bad guy!!"

A small scuffle broke out between the two idiots, but they were not going to escape the issue at hand like that.

Now, what do cooked crickets actually taste like?

Part 4

“Now, it’s time for war!! …Hm? Someone’s eating something in here. What’s that smell?”

Frolaytia Capistrano frowned on top of the dais and the source of the smell was the usual two idiots.

“(These crickets are surprisingly good.)”

“(They’re like small fried shrimp. Y’know, like those sakura shrimp. Anyway, let’s eat them all before they get cold.)”

They were so focused on munching away that they were relatively quiet for once.

Frolaytia looked suspicious, but she began her briefing.

“The battlefield today is a grassy field covering forty square kilometers around here. There are some hills, but they won’t even break out of the margin of error for an Object. There are no rivers, mountains, canyons, deserts, or other geographical features of note. It’s just a boring field.”

A map was projected on the wall behind her, but it was nothing but green.

Several giant circles were added to indicate the expected positions of the Objects.

“We and the other world powers are calling this a joint military exercise known as the Gigant Hustler and the most important point is the number of Objects taking part. There’s a total of eight and this isn’t the usual structure of one-on-one or many-against-one. The Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization have all sent out two Objects each. That makes this a balanced melee with little room for power games. No one can predict how this will turn out.”

Records of past battles were used to display photos and predicted

specs around the circles representing the Objects.

Legitimacy Kingdom.

Baby Magnum.

Its main cannons were supported by seven arms attached to the back of the spherical body by joints. It used a static electricity

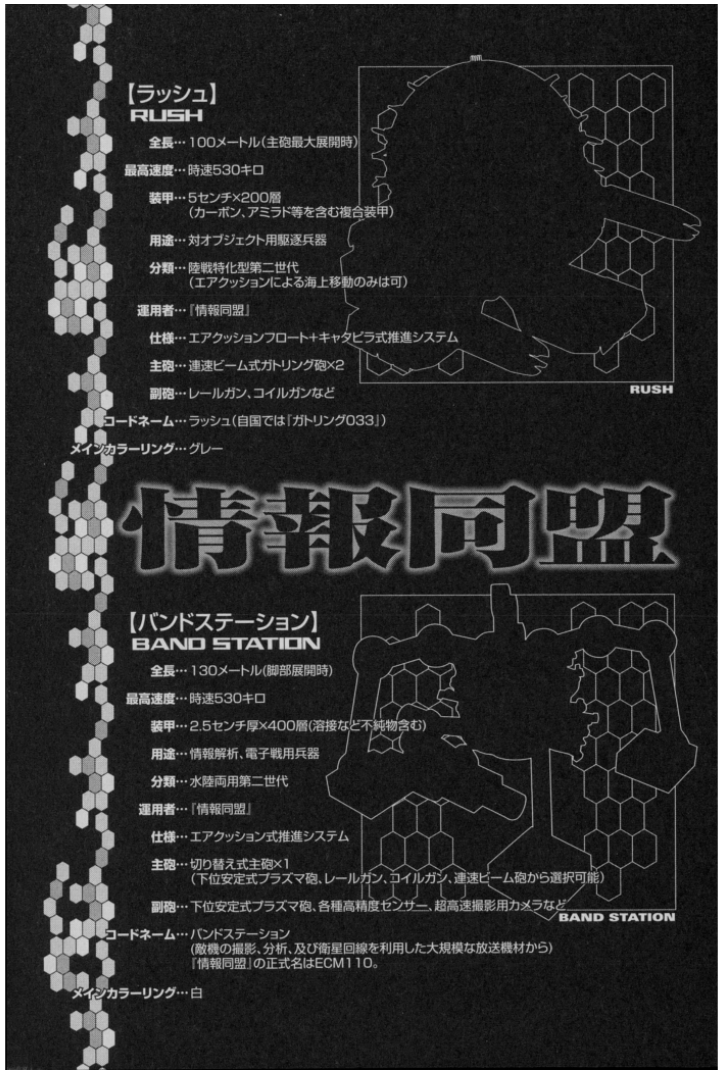
propulsion device and its floats were structured in a reverse Y-shape.

This all-purpose First Generation used its seven changeable main cannons based on the principles of diffusion and convergence. It had no outstanding features, but that allowed it to apply even damage to any opponent. Even if an opponent had specialized armor or defense methods for lasers, coilguns, or whatever else, it could swap out the type of cannon used to adapt.

Royal Residence.

Uneven rectangular structures larger than the main body were attached to the left, right, and back of the spherical body. It had plenty of additional equipment such as a supercomputer, an armory, and extra cooling devices. It was also armed with equipment too large for a normal Object such as a largescale radar, a main cannon larger than a bridge, and rocket boosters for high speed movement. It used a static electricity propulsion device with irregularly positioned circular floats.

This oddly shaped Second Generation had further increased the size of its already giant exterior using its many additional pieces of equipment and armor. By lighting the countless boosters attached across itself despite their great size and weight, it could achieve great mobility in exchange for some intense inertial Gs.



Information Alliance.

Rush.

A rapid-fire beam Gatling cannon was attached to the left and right side of its spherical body. It used an air cushion propulsion device with the floats arranged in a cross. The bottom of the floats contained giant chainsaw-like treads that allowed for extremely high-speed evasive actions when used in addition to the air cushion.

This Second Generation excelled at close-quarters combat while swinging around its two rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons. It used the quick evasive actions of its air cushion and tread combo to slip through the gaps in its opponent's barrage and threaten them with a point-blank range rapid-fire blast.

Band Station.

Its one main cannon was located on its right side. The rear of the cannon had four pieces linked together on top of each other. By sliding those up and down, it could switch between a low-stability plasma canon, a railgun, a coilgun, or a rapid-fire beam cannon. The left side contained a sensor turret the same size as the main cannon that had tons of cameras, microphones, sensors, radars, etc. attached. It used an air cushion propulsion device and the floats were attached to the end of four devices resembling heavy machinery arms that extended from the top of the spherical body.

This Second Generation had a very "Information Alliance-y" design that used its many cameras and sensors to search for the enemy's weak points instead of focusing on direct firepower. It was also known for the powerful broadcast equipment inside that sent out a quiz show with extremely lucrative prizes for the people back in the safe countries. It used the entertainment and greed of over one billion people to analyze the enemy Object.

The Capitalist Corporations.

Spider Joust.

It had an extremely large main cannon on the top of its spherical body. Containers were lined up on the left and right sides of that body to eject barbed wire and instant glue meant to slow down the enemy. It used an air cushion propulsion device, the floats were arranged in a line at the front and back of the Object, and those

floats were supported by arms.

This Second Generation preferred to use a low-stability plasma cannon from extreme close range. It would approach at extreme high speed, but it was also well-equipped with barbed wire, instant glue, molten metal and other ways to slow down the enemy Object. It was known for fighting like a jousting spider, just as its name suggested.

Mobius Infinity.

It had three main cannons equipped on the upper back of the spherical body. Those main cannons could freely change their angle to aim anywhere between straight ahead and straight up. It used a static electricity propulsion device that arranged five rings like flower petals.

This unique Second Generation used three large railguns as its main cannons. The shells had wings for attitude control and it preferred to fire them straight up to an extremely high altitude where they would turn in the shape of a Mobius strip and destroy the enemy from above. The attack combined the kinetic energy of the railgun with the potential energy of the high altitude to produce destructive power rivaling a meteor strike experiment.

Faith Organization.

Self Deception.

The main cannon attached to the top of the spherical body was a rapid-fire beam cannon structured like a reflecting telescope. Its static electricity propulsion device had a single main float passing straight below the spherical body with a sub float on either side that was attached with an arm bent into a V-shape. Overall, it

resembled a balancing toy. A variety of deception armaments were supported by the suspended wings extending horizontally from the left and right sides of the spherical body.

This Second Generation was intensely focused on deception weapons like chaff, flares, and jammers. More than just keeping the enemy's attacks from hitting, it sometimes had the enemy fire on its own forces or get caught in a blast after mistaking the range of an explosion.

Sand Cluster.

Its one main cannon was attached to the very front of the spherical body. Several giant, speaker-like gravitational control devices and iron sand launchers were attached to the left and right sides. It used an air cushion propulsion device, two of the floats extended from the center to the left and right, and four others extended diagonally backwards.

This Second Generation controlled its low-stability plasma cannons with massive amounts of magnetism. The cannon itself could spread out like a fan which allowed for a number of tricky cannon techniques such as diffused plasma blasts, disseminating magnetized iron sand through the air, or curving the plasma's trajectory a little to better target the enemy.

As he saw the data appear one after another, Heivia gulped down some of his cricket food and raised his hand.

"Teacher, this is way too much to take in at one time. Are you screwing with us?"

"Even if failing to grasp all this could directly lead to your death? And look, Quenser's eyes are shining."

"P-pant, pant!! A-as far as the eye can see…pant, pant, pant! Completely surrounded…pant, pant, pant!! Shudder… So much classified information…uuh!!"

"Oh, god!! There's a rainbow light coming from this pervert!!"

Heivia shouted as his awful friend stood next to him trembling.

Frolaytia ignored them to continue with her briefing.

“The battlefield is forty kilometers in each direction and an Object’s average firing range is ten kilometers. Send eight of them in there, and they’ll be scraping up against someone’s firing range whenever they move. The Princess needs to assume she’ll always be under attack from multiple directions.”

There was no guarantee of a one-on-one battle, but the one-against-many structure was generally considered bad news during Object battles.

What would these eight Objects do?

The battlefield would not remain in balance forever. Some would try to keep their distance while others would actively move in to attack. Those uneven “irregularities” would set the entire battlefield in motion.

In the worst case, it was entirely possible one would be ganged up on as soon as the battle began.

“This was called Gigant Hustler because the Objects act a little like billiards balls, but it’s really more like a game of musical chairs. Whether it’s to attack or escape, standing out carries the risk of death.”

Frolaytia marked two of the eight Objects.

“And the two that stand out the most now are the biggest threat and the smallest threat. Should we defeat the big boss to secure our safety or should we take out a small fry we know we can handle? Excluding our own forces, the former is the Capitalist Corporations’ Mobius Infinity which can produce the destruction of a meteor strike and the latter is the Faith Organization’s Self Deception which has plenty of deception weapons but comes up short in firepower.”

The strongest was the Mobius Infinity.

The weakest was the Self Deception.

In a battle of life-or-death, chivalry was meaningless. When asked who to target, the standard idea was to begin with the enemy they could most easily defeat.

Except Frolaytia had a different idea.

“We have narrowed down our target to the Mobius Infinity because we can defeat the weakest one at any time. If we don’t bring a many-against-one battle against the Mobius Infinity and destroy it early, we’ll have more trouble later once it has fewer enemies to worry about. Plus, fear is a powerful motivator. Once one Object starts the attack, the others will decide to join the winning team.”

In this game of musical chairs, they would isolate the Mobius Infinity and set up a situation where all the other Objects ganged up on it.

Quenser swallowed some fried crickets and asked a question.

“Um, what exactly are we going to do?”

“That is the excellent question of an excellent student. This battle is being passed off as a military exercise, so the odds of an Object directly attacking infantry is extremely low. …Although that probably means there are going to be some ‘accidents during live fire exercises’ between infantry teams. You’re going to use that to infiltrate the warfront. And of course, your goal is sabotage.”

Frolaytia marked another Object.

It was the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Band Station.

“This one is named after a broadcast station because it observes the enemy Object with its many sensors and sends it back to their safe countries as a quiz show with extremely lucrative prizes. Basically, over a billion bored people are used to find a weakness. First, turn its attention toward the Mobius Infinity. The Mobius Infinity is filled with cutting-edge military technology, so it won’t want to reveal all of its secrets in front of that analysis device. And the other Objects are sure to jump at the chance to attack while its movements are dulled. After all, it’s the one they least want to fight

at full power.”

“Will that really work?”

“Just like poker, this is a world of strategy. If the Mobius Infinity has weathered the battle for a while and used its secret attacks several times already, it’ll grow defiant and go all out. But the electronic simulation division predicts it might not be willing to show that much resolve right away. Based on the records of its past battles, the Mobius Infinity’s Pilot Elite is very cautious. The odds are good they’ll try to avoid as much damage as possible as they fight.”

The two idiots began whispering with crickets in hand.

“(What do you think? She’s basically telling us to pretend we’re doing something to the Mobius Infinity. We haven’t found an actual weakness, but we’re supposed to purposefully get caught by an Object. She claims the Band Station will notice us doing something and start focusing that way, but I get the feeling the Mobius Infinity is going to ignore her assumptions and start slaughtering the infantry.)”

“(How the hell should I know? Nothing she and those huge tits have ever suggested has turned out well for us. Anything that sound good ends up being the worst thing imaginable, so maybe we should count ourselves lucky that we have a chance to prepare ourselves for the coming danger this time.)”

Meanwhile, someone else spoke.

It was the Pilot Elite Princess.

“I understand not wanting to expose yourself to the Band Station, but then what about me?”

Frolaytia removed the kiseru from her mouth and slowly exhaled the sweet-smelling smoke.

For once, she sounded apologetic as she answered.

“Information on your First Generation is already pretty well known,

so the damage will be minimal compared to a cutting-edge Second Generation. …Or so the higher ups concluded."

"…"

The Princess fell into a sulking silence.

Her mental condition could have a major impact on the course of a battle, but Frolaytia had chosen to give her a direct answer.

"Think of this as a chance to get the upper hand while they're looking down on you. Princess, you can decide what to do after the Objects have focused on the Mobius Infinity. You can assist them in destroying the Mobius Infinity or you can start attacking your #2 and #3 enemies while they're focused on the attack. Just play it by ear. But whatever you do, remember that allowing the Mobius Infinity to survive would be dangerous. As long as its destruction is a part of your plan, you are free to decide what order you will deal with the rest."

"Understood. I just have to destroy them all and be the last one standing, right?"

Frolaytia grinned at that.

This was nothing like an overly-protective school in a safe country. The military knew the best way to motivate someone was to hurt their pride just a little.

"Also, I'm sure the other world powers will also send in plenty of soldiers as part of the 'exercise'. They'll be doing what they can to get the upper hand in this game of musical chairs. Be on the lookout for conspiracies and saboteurs, and defeat them if necessary. Or kill them for no real reason. I don't really care. That is all."

Part 5

And so Quenser and Heivia were hiding on the ground with some other soldiers. The area was covered by waist-height grass, so crouching down a little was all someone would need to do if they wanted to get away with some outdoorsy baby-making.

“It’s called a Slingshot,” complained Heivia.

The metal tube on his back was two sizes larger than his normal shoulder-fired missile launcher. There was even a small LCD monitor attached to the side. Just like modern laptops, the screen could be removed, allowing someone other than the firer to set up the targeting.

It was cutting-edge, but the soldiers hated it because it was heavy, fragile, expensive, and filled with so much technology they were not allowed to abandon it on the battlefield.

“Are they morons? Did they name it that because they *want* us to point out that isn’t what it is!? Why do weapons developers have to have such a warped sense of humor!?”

“Quit shouting. This is the battlefield, so we need to be quiet. Got it?”

“It doesn’t matter what we do. There are eight objects here and they’re all bristling with sensors. They’ll find us even if we take a nice leisurely nap here. Maybe I should ask someone to rub some sun oil on my back.”

Quenser and Heivia both had a reinforced plastic case in each hand. They contained the missiles warheads and firing powder for the Slingshot. They would never be able to fight while trudging along with such a large burden, but this was a joint military exercise.

“Oh, there they go,” muttered Heivia as he heard explosive sounds in the distance.

They did not come from Object cannons. If they did, the shockwave would have been enough to knock them over. They were hearing the little people firing on the giant from Gulliver's Travels.

"That's meaningless," decided Quenser.

"You're damn right it is! They're attacking the…which one is that?"

"The Sand Cluster. It's a Faith Organization Second Generation that uses a low-stability plasma cannon."

"Oh, I see. And are those multiple rocket launchers the little people are firing at it? Did their Object ask them to judge its interception accuracy?"

"And yet a direct hit from one of those wouldn't even scratch it. It sure is nice to bother shooting them all down."

The soldiers were firing like crazy now that they had seen the Object would not fire back at them. Otherwise, they would only have been able to tremble and ball up on the ground in fear.

Then a cheerful voice arrived over the radio.

"…Ksshh… Yes, this is a momentous occasion, so I would have loved to send in Cynthia, our company's cutting-edge Second Generation, but she is currently busy suppressing the Soberania Disturbance near the Panama Canal. That said, the two Objects we did send in are wonderful as well. The copycats made elsewhere can never hope to match how we give physical form to the fighting spirit of our Pilot Elites."

"That concludes the scheduled interview with Acre Kiss-of-Rose, the very busy CEO of Salem Logistics. Also, a Capitalist Corporations PMC is planning some wartime evacuation training based on an imagined attack by special commandos from another world power…ksshh…"

"What was that? Are we picking up some other radio broadcast?"

"This is just a giant plain and broadcast stations from all over the world have shown up to relay the Gigant Hustler. Add in the

amateurish news site reporters and the people obsessed with uploading videos to the internet, and the chaos only grows. There are no rules about what frequencies to use here, so people will end up using the same one."

"Does that mean our transmissions are reaching them?"

"We just have to pray whoever developed our encryption tech wasn't slacking off. …Anyway, it sure is peaceful on the 'outside'. And what good is evacuation training if you announce it's only training in the first place? Even a school's evacuation training has a little more tension than that."

At any rate, Quenser and Heivia had work to do and could not get caught up in a pointless conflict.

The two of them gave the Faith Organization's Sand Cluster a wide berth as they stayed low and walked through the waist-height grass.

"This can't be good for my hips."

"Yeah, and I've decided I don't want to hurt my hips from anything other than a night spent with a woman."

A few wild birds flew into the air about five hundred meters ahead.

Heivia raised a hand horizontally and Quenser stopped moving.

"Someone's there."

"You mean that rustling? But all this shooting is bound to scare some animals."

"It isn't timed with the explosions."

Heivia's rifle had a number of sensors, but infrared could be blocked to a certain extent with special materials and both ultrasonic waves and the microwaves of radar were not very effective in this tall grass. But holding his breath and observing carefully revealed something in the scenery that did not belong.

"Found them. The Faith Organization's Valkyries are five hundred

meters ahead and an Information Alliance powered suit unit is three hundred to the left of them."

"What do we do?"

"One group is an internal discipline squad meant to deal with the unfaithful and the other is made up of walking wireless routers meant for electronic warfare. Small fries like us aren't going to get paid any more for fighting each other and the Gigant Hustler is underway, so ignoring each other is the best plan for everyone involved."

As soon as Heivia moved to the side, the other groups started moving as well.

The three groups did not want a direct confrontation, so they moved in giant circle to pass by each other without moving closer than a few hundred meters to each other. It looked like the roundabouts seen on European roads or rotating sushi being removed from the conveyer belt after no one chose it.

Quenser spoke quietly to his awful friend while following him.

"We handled that peacefully. Mankind has finally overcome our history."

"Oh, shut up. They'll be marking out location on their maps. We need to assume they're burying a landmine while smiling so kindly our way. And there are plenty of landmines made from wood, glass, or plastic that can slip right past a metal detector."

The two of them looked back to watch the other figures disappear.

"Did you see all the antennae on those powered suits?"

"I said they're for electronic warfare, didn't I?"

"You can't jam an Object that has a control center bigger than a fortress's and the amplification provided by any targeting assistance would be less than a decimal point."

"Still better than the Valkyries. Those scouts are sent out to observe

the infantry at the bottom in an attempt to read the intentions and movement patterns of the entire pyramid structure, but that's completely useless if the Object decides to trample on its own allies to win."

Distant explosions rang out once more.

There had likely been a lag to reload the multiple rocket launchers.

"Those must be the Capitalist Corporations' mechanized combat engineers."

"Oh, what a cool name."

"Just to be clear, that doesn't mean they're cyborgs. It means they use vehicles. They're apparently all from civil engineering companies and their main mission is to stop the enemy Object by digging tunnels through the battlefield to create pitfalls, by pumping water to submerge the area, or by whatever means they can come up with. Basically, they're specialists in military tractors and tunneling machines."

"Neat. They sound like the most effective ones."

"How!? One stray shell from an Object creates a giant crater. Slowly digging a little tunnel isn't going to stop those cutting-edge machines, you idiot!!"

"Sure the pitfalls would be useless, but what about the water? If the Object uses static electricity propulsion like the Princess…"

"This entire map is a giant green plain. Do you see any rivers to draw water from?"

As they argued, they continued through some even taller grass. They occasionally came across the paths left by other units, but they chose to trample their own way through the grass instead of using the easier "premade" paths. Simply put, they were afraid of mines.

Heivia came to a stop again when he heard some unnatural rustling to the side.

“They’re on our side.”

Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers gathered in this one spot after taking different routes to get there.

And up ahead…

“Looks like it’s still warming up.”

Quenser looked at its majestic form through gaps in the grass.

Going all out, an Object could instantly reach speeds of over five hundred kph. It could easily lose these infantry soldiers, but a total of eight Objects were taking part in the Gigant Hustler. Any thoughtless movement would be like making the first shot in a game of billiards.

It might seem harmless at first, but that one move could end up placing a noose around its neck.

And so it tried to give that first move as much thought as possible even if that meant ignoring the insignificant infantry.

The crawling challenger spat out the name of the ruler sitting in its throne.

“A Capitalist Corporations Second Generation… The Mobius Infinity.”

Part 6

Sad to say, no matter how much computerization and digitization advanced, soldiers who got separated from their unit were far from uncommon. In fact, the more they grew to rely on precise machinery, the more they had difficulty regrouping or returning to base once the machines malfunctioned. Basically, they had gone soft.

And so…

“The focus of today’s Grand Eyes News will be wars fought over supply routes.”

“This might not be immediately obvious, but everything I’m wearing – from the suit, the shirt, the tie, the belt, the socks, the shoes, and even the underwear – may say they’re domestic products on the tag, but the original materials are not necessarily so. Does that much make sense?”

“Oh? But what about the toupee? That had to have cost more than any of those other things.”

“I’ll kill you, you bitch of a newscaster! …As you can see, the ability to maintain supply routes by deploying largescale units including Objects has great strategic importance that even affects your own lives. Memories of the incidents in the Indian Ocean, the Panama Canal, and the Strait of Gibraltar are probably still fresh in your minds, but…”

A man wandered through the Gigant Hustler exercise grounds while listening to a radio show like a housewife taking care of housework with the TV on.

“Honestly, this is so heavy.”

No one paid him any heed as he wandered around one edge of the battlefield. Units from the four world powers were moving every which way at the moment, so enemy and ally alike were ignoring

this soldier who had lost his way and his will to fight.

And so he was overlooked.

The middle-aged man with pristinely parted hair did not look built for physical labor and his military uniform was worn down like used clothing. He set down the metal tripod resting on his shoulder, spread the device's legs, and fixed it in place.

It resembled a camera's tripod, but one aspect was decidedly different.

Another long, narrow metal cylinder extended straight down from the joint of the three legs. The cylinder's tip formed a sharp stake and one side had a plain lever and a "sliding metal window" meant for loading and ejecting cartridges.

"Now, then. It was 7.62mm blanks that worked, wasn't it?"

He almost seemed to be recalling the manual as he pulled the lever to open the metal window, pulled a cartridge from his pocket, and slid it inside the cylinder. He pushed the lever back into place to finish loading. It was much like forcibly loading a bullet through the ejection port after a bolt-action sniper rifle's magazine broke.

But this device was not meant to blow someone's brains out.

International weaponry law did not even classify it as a firearm.

The man lowered the vertical cylinder by rotating the round metal wheel attached where a camera would normally be. Its sharp tip stabbed into the soft dirt. Rather than the sharpness of a sword, it had the gradual but constant pressure of a vise. He brought it accurately down to the red line on the side of the cylinder.

The preparations were complete.

"Time for the first shot. …There are explosions all over the place, so I wonder if this will even work."

The man brought his finger to the trigger.

Part 7

The Mobius Infinity was a Second Generation belonging to the Capitalist Corporations. It used a static electricity propulsion device and its five ring-shaped floats were arranged like flower petals. It had been made for long-distance attacks and it had three ultra-large railguns attached on the back. Instead of directly targeting the enemy, it primarily fired straight upwards, sending giant shells with control wings up to the stratosphere where they would turn like a Mobius strip and attack the enemy Object from the sky. Immense kinetic energy was combined with the potential energy of the great altitude to produce destruction rumored to rival a meteor strike.

That Object was considered the greatest enemy here and thus it bore the risk of being the first target out of the eight.

“This is insane.”

Heivia lowered his Slingshot multipurpose missile launcher to the grassy ground.

“That shell would continue on up into space if they didn’t have it turn, so why are they dropping it back down? Couldn’t they use that cannon to build a peaceful country on Mars or something?”

“The Capitalist Corporations are supposed to be pioneers in the field of mass drivers, aren’t they? I’m sure they have plenty of offshoots like this.”

“So you’re saying this world is filled with idiots?”

As Heivia complained, Quenser opened the reinforced plastic case he had placed on the ground. Inside were cylinders five centimeters wide and thirty centimeters long placed inside waterproof packages. They contained the powder combination used to fire the missile.

“Two of them make a set. I need to cut off the edge with my survival kit’s knife and attach the clasp and plug that reveals.”

“The warhead is still empty. Don’t forget to add in Set C.”

“Yes, yes. Leave it all to the legendary maid Quensette. Would you like fries and a drink with that?”

He unscrewed the rugby ball-shaped warhead and opened it up. After splitting it in two, he attached a sheet of explosives on the inside of the back. He then shoved inside the unit packed in plastic and closed the capsule once more.

He finally attached the firing powder cylinder to the rugby ball-shaped warhead and pushed the club-like missile toward Heivia.

“What a pain in the ass. Couldn’t they just give us the completed missile?”

“This freedom is the entire point of the thing. We can prepare and fire warheads with any number of effects, so it comes in handy in a variety of situations.”

In this case, they were using a combination of instant glue and a special wire net sharp enough to cut off a human finger. It could not destroy an Object, but there was some hope it could gum up some of the movable parts or joints.

“Isn’t that why it’s on the verge of being classified as an inhumane weapon? If you wanted to, you could fire liquid nitrogen or the growth medium for a biological weapon.”

“Yeah, I saw a video online of a soldier on an angry rampage after one covered him in dogshit. But that had to be a setup. Once it went viral, he started showing up in the ads.”

“But people always associate him with being covered in shit, so no one liked having him show up on TV during dinner time.”

Heivia stuck the club inside the firing tube and twisted it until he heard a click. The Slingshot missile was now complete.

“Get a few spare shots ready. And deal with this.”

Heivia removed the flat monitor attached to the side of the launcher

and tossed it to Quenser.

“Hey, what am I supposed to do with this?”

“Were you even listening to the pre-mission briefing? Over a hundred of our comrades are hiding around here like peepers in the park at night. We’ll synchronize all of our triggers to make a simultaneous saturation attack from one hundred directions at once. I’m busy making some minor adjustments to the hardware, so you take care of the network setup.”

“But I want to be a designer. I live in the world of mechanics. Can I just hit ‘yes’ or ‘okay’ to everything that appears on the screen?”

“Don’t worry. This is easier to use than a tablet for housewives. Just keep your finger moving like you’re looking up the recipe for dinner tonight.”

“Are you sure…?”

Quenser frowned as he leaned over the tablet and moved his finger across the display. It was unclear if he was controlling the device or vice versa.

“I’m done, I think. …Wait, is this connected through normal Wi-Fi!? That’s really dangerous!!”

“Want a real shock? Each of these launchers can be used for tethering. Makes me want to leave one in a net café.”

The setup on the screen was complete, but Quenser and Heivia’s work was not done. The student set the monitor down and began preparing more missiles while Heivia rested the launcher on his shoulder and looked up at the Capitalist Corporations’ Second Generation Mobius Infinity.

Quenser began complaining under his breath.

“(Tch. I brought a high-quality loupe and a millimeter wave scanner, but it doesn’t look like I’ll get a chance to use them.)”

“We’re about to get started, skinny boy. Watch where you stand if

you don’t want to get caught in the backfire.”

The sound of the missile firing resembled escaping steam.

The missile rocketed out from the launcher on Heivia’s shoulder. A normal missile might have looked like a great spear in the sky with a long shaft of smoke and a blade of orange light, but this one did not. From over one hundred directions along the 180 degrees behind the Mobius Infinity, over one hundred shots were fired. The missiles had all been fired from a single pull of the trigger, so they looked like the dancing digital meter on the screen of a sound system.

They were targeting the three main cannons attached to the back of the Mobius Infinity’s spherical body. Those dangerous weapons fired giant shells into the stratosphere where they twisted around and dropped from the sky. But if something went wrong there, the situation on the battlefield would definitely change. The other Objects would move to defeat their most powerful enemy before it could recover.

An Object’s anti-air laser beams could shoot down any aircraft or missile headed its way, but what about a simultaneous attack from too many missiles for the optical weaponry to handle?

What if they surpassed its limits and just one shot slipped past the net of death?

That was the definition of a saturation attack.

However…

Orange explosions blossomed across the entire sky.

They had not hit; every last one of them had been shot down by the laser beams.

Quenser glanced down at the monitor on the ground. The paths of the missiles were drawn like a reverse hedgehog, but they all ended in an X-mark and the word “lost”. The repeated word was overlapped too much to read it anymore.

“Oh, honestly! I knew this wouldn’t work! This entire job was pointless!!”

“Even the worst Object can withstand a nuke, so the entire concept was wrong from the moment they tried to cause a malfunction with traditional firepower!”

With missiles and recoilless rifles, the smoke of firing allowed the enemy to quickly locate the origin point, so Quenser and Heivia grabbed the launcher, spare warheads, and monitor before making a mad dash through the tall grass.

Their comrades who had fired from over one hundred other locations were probably scattering as well.

“So far, this is all going as planned! Quenser, tap the monitor to start up the communication software with the yellow triangle icon. You take care of the rest!!”

“Won’t those Second Generations get suspicious when we used encryption before!?”

“This is meaningless if we aren’t certain they’ll intercept it. Just get to it! A weird time lag will make them suspicious too!!”

Quenser operated the machine in complete desperation.

He attached the image of their “results” that had been prepared in advance and then spoke to silver-haired well-endowed Frolaytia who was sitting safely at the very back of the battlefield.

“Oh! Behold the crimson furor of yonder flame!! The Mobius Infinity’s fearsome fangs are caked in ebony soot and lack the bite necessary to devour its foe. Oh, radiant warrior princess, great honor is sure to be thine afore thy gain any muscle in thine delicate arms!!”

Heivia did a spit-take.

After Quenser ended the transmission, Heivia just about grabbed his collar as he shouted at him.

“This isn’t a school play, you moron! Why did you turn this into something from a musical!?”

“If an amateur tries to add in a subtle flavor, everyone will notice right away. So it’s better to dump a bunch of curry powder in so it tastes the same to everyone. …Besides, that’s basically how people see the Legitimacy Kingdom. They actually seem to think we still throw white gloves at each other to pick fights with a sabre in one hand.”

“Are you serious? But even nobles like me shop online.”

A light flashed on the monitor in Quenser’s hand.

They were far enough away from their previous spot, so the two idiots stopped and looked to the screen.

“They’re moving, they’re moving. A few Objects are approaching the Mobius Infinity and starting to secure a line of fire. It worked!”

“I’m not sure I like that they were fooled by that. Maybe I need to work on improving the Winchell family’s diplomatic image.”

“If you’re our representative, everyone will think the Legitimacy Kingdom is Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Meanwhile, Quenser’s farce had set the situation in motion. Negative attention was turning in the Mobius Infinity’s direction.

The Information Alliance’s Second Generation Rush.

The Faith Organization’s Second Generation Self Deception.

The Faith Organization’s Second Generation Sand Cluster.

And to get it all started and to draw the others in, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s First Generation Baby Magnum and Second Generation Royal Residence were also approaching while making bluffs to the left and right.

The only one taking a “wait and see” approach was the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Band Station which was in charge of

information analysis and broadcasting. Then again, it could be seen as “attacking” by filming like a sniper or paparazzo.

The Capitalist Corporations Second Generation Spider Joust positioned itself as the vanguard to shield the Mobius Infinity from the approaching Objects while firing from long-distance, but at this point, its enemies could push past it using their superior numbers.

“It’s finally turning out the way we wanted.”

“I can’t believe all this was just the first step of our plan. How many more steps before the Princess and the Baby Magnum can come back alive? It feels like it’s about time for someone to bring out the tea and cookies.”

But as the two idiots complained, something unexpected happened.

Part 8

“Yes.”

The man in the camouflage military uniform would have looked more at home as a door-to-door salesman in a cheap suit, but he was instead wiping sweat from his brow while surrounded by tall grass.

“It shouldn’t be long now.”

Part 9

The phenomenon itself was extremely simple.

The three main cannons attached to the back of the Mobius Infinity's spherical body were long-range railguns. They used Fleming's left hand rule to fire metal shells larger than a small car at tremendous speeds.

As soon as the other Objects surrounded it at five kilometers (mid-range for an Object), the Mobius Infinity fired its multiple main cannons in quick succession.

Those railguns were aimed straight up like metal towers.

The metal shells had adjustable control wings on the sides, so they did not fly in a simple arc like a long throw in baseball. It was more like a figure eight, the infinity sign, or a Mobius strip. After being fired straight up, the metal shells followed an unnatural curve to an altitude of twenty-five thousand meters where they turned around, added the gravitational acceleration on top of their magnetic acceleration, and dropped toward their targets with dreadful speed.

And what happened then?

One of the surrounding Objects, the more than fifty meter Self Deception, spilled its insides like a crushed fruit.

The ground was torn up for kilometers, creating a great crater. It almost looked like a giant's foot had stomped on the ground there.

The shockwave was visible thanks to the dust and sand as it approached from beyond the horizon.

"Waaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Quenser and Heivia knew it was coming, but there was nothing they could do. They immediately got on the ground and covered the backs of their heads with their hands, but they were still peeled up and tossed into the air. They were reminded of news footage of cars

and pieces of houses blown away by a hurricane.

Fortunately, they were only lifted about two meters and being slammed back into the soft grassy ground was not going to kill them, but then the second wave arrived.

Far in the distance, the flattened Self Deception's reactor exploded as if it had only just now remembered to do so.

The blast itself did not reach them, but the bright flash of light stabbed into their eyeballs.

"You've gotta…dammit…be kidding me! Damn, that huge-breasted commander! This time…this time I'm going to…!!"

Heivia wailed as he held his head in his hands, but Quenser could not hear what he was saying.

He desperately rubbed his eyes to bring back his vision, but then his blurry vision managed to see yet another explosion.

"You're kidding… The Mobius Infinity's main cannons are skewering the other Objects from above while they're shaken by that first blast!!"

"Oh, goddammit!! You mean another flash is going to blind us!?"

This time, the Faith Organization's Sand Cluster was transformed into scrap metal.

Next, the Rush piloted by the Information Alliance's Oh ho ho was almost hit, but it sacrificed its right main cannon to just barely avoid it.

Heivia was sent tumbling along the ground again and again, but his expression changed entirely when he looked up.

The Objects had scattered wreckage in every direction like a volcanic eruption, so twisted pieces of cannon barrels the size of bridges and armor panels larger than busses were raining down around them.

It did not matter that they were four or five kilometers away.

“Watch out! Dodge!!”

“Dodge where!?”

Quenser attempted a meaningless dive to the side, but Heivia grabbed the back of his neck and forced him to his feet. They somehow managed to escape disaster like an un-athletic player running away from the baseball after being stuck in the outfield to fill an empty spot on the team.

“Can we really beat something like this!?”

“Not if it was just us, but this is the Gigant Hustler! There are plenty of Objects just like it!”

The Mobius Infinity had achieved astounding results, but it was still outnumbered.

If the four remaining non-Capitalist Corporations Objects made a suicidal charge together, they may have been able to defeat the Mobius Infinity.

However…

“Dammit, something isn’t right,” spat out Heivia while leaning against the wreckage of a main cannon sticking out of the ground nearby. “The Objects surrounding it are getting oddly wary of each other. Have they given up on defeating the final boss together and are instead trying to defeat whatever enemies they can!?”

Gigant Hustler was the world’s greatest battle which included eight Objects, but it was also a massive psychological battle between the Pilot Elites.

Who would target who first?

Whose help would they use to attack who and when would they make their betrayal to get ahead?

“This was is a battle to survive. None of them are going to agree to

work together when it could easily mean their own destruction."

"Yeah, but if the Mobius Infinity sticks around, they don't stand a chance against it on their own. Don't they all get that!?"

"Then, Heivia, are you going to volunteer as the first to sacrifice himself to help the others? That's what this is about. We can't count on the Objects. They're holding the bottom of their skirt and fidgeting as they try to keep from wetting themselves, so we'll be at checkmate in no time if we rely on them!"

Quenser clenched his teeth as the Objects ended their brief joint fight against the Mobius Infinity and started moving away from the others.

The Princess's Baby Magnum was one of those.

Given her mission objective, it was obvious she didn't want to end the fight against the Mobius Infinity, but if she alone remained, she would be immediately picked off by that enemy Object. She could not fight the current trend of the situation.

So who would be the first one ejected from this deadly game of musical chairs?

The Mobius Infinity was the most powerful yet had used brute force to stop anyone else from targeting it.

The Self Deception had been the weakest and it had already been blown away.

No one knew what would happen next and anyone could be the next one kicked out.

And that was when another unexpected event occurred.

The ground around the Baby Magnum suddenly split apart and a massive amount of water burst out.

Water was the greatest weakness of a static electricity propulsion device.

“What…the hell?” muttered Heivia.

This was more than a water pipe bursting. Cracks covered the entire surface and the Baby Magnum was nearly swallowed up by a great torrent like a South American waterfall turned upside down.

“No, wait. Wait, wait!! The Princess is using static electricity, so she can’t cross rivers or the ocean. So isn’t all that water really bad!?”

Once it caught her, she would be unable to move.

The Princess spun her Object around as if kicking at the ground like a horse and desperately tried to escape the flooded area, but even if she did escape, the impassable zone would grow as the water continued to surge out. And what would the other monsters do once her freedom of movement was restricted?

“Where did all that water even come from!? The entire map is green and there aren’t any obvious rivers anywhere!!”

“No,” muttered Quenser. “We were thinking about this wrong. Why isn’t this place a desert? Because there’s water. I don’t know who, but someone searched out an underground water vein and set up bombs at the Princess’s feet! They weaponized the water that’s keeping this giant plain nice and green!!”

“But how? And who? Was it those mechanized combat engineers from the Capitalist Corporations? It’s true I’ve heard those civil engineers use tunnels and manmade wetlands to stop Objects.”

“If they could accomplish this, they would be doing a lot more. And they would stand out so much that we probably would have been sent out to shoot them.”

“Then who did this!?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Besides, that isn’t the biggest problem.”

Far in the distance, an Object made a large turn.

It was the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Rush.

The Pilot Elite they referred to as the Oh ho ho mercilessly aimed her one remaining rapid-fire beam Gatling cannon to take advantage of the Baby Magnum's unexpected trouble.

"It doesn't look like she's going to overlook this just because they know each other."

"She's had one of her main cannons destroyed. If she's seen as an easy target, the others will be quick to attack, so she can't let herself look weak."

A few other Objects followed the Rush's lead and targeted the Baby Magnum.

And one of those was the Mobius Infinity.

"Oh, no," groaned Quenser. "We need something to turn this around. If we let this continue as is, we'll have to see the Princess torn into from every direction!!"

Part 10

The lanky man rested something like a giant steel compass on his shoulder and slowly left the front line.

With its barrel, trigger, ejection port, and cocking lever, the device resembled a simplified bolt-action sniper rifle, but it was not meant to shoot people. It was an explosive underground probe that searched for buried objects using the shockwave of an explosion.

It could of course be used to locate underground water veins.

The device was meant for use in deep forests or deserts with no cars anywhere nearby, so it required miraculous skill to accurately locate anything with all the explosions in the area.

The skinny man looked back just once to view the battlefield he had set into motion.

“Now, then. I’ve poked the hornet’s nest with water from the hose. I look forward to what you do next, gentlemen.”

No one noticed the man slipping away from the confused battlefield. Or rather, he appeared on the Objects’ anti-personnel sensors and the cameras of drones, but he only looked like a pathetic modern soldier who was trying to find help outside the exercise grounds after getting himself separated from his unit. He had set everything up to make sure he looked that way.

The voices of a broadcast station reached his ears.

“Special commando units that specialize in terrorist attacks on safe country metropolises have been in decline in this age of clean wars using Objects and all related nations have announced a reduction in their usage.”

“But at the same time, there are many unknowns about what happened to those commandos ‘afterwards’. Some are suspected to have joined antigovernment or anti-Object groups where they plan

attacks on safe countries or help smuggle people into the safe countries. Even the previous Soberania Disturbance near the Panama Canal is said to have involved those commandos."

As the tall, skinny man parted the tall grass, he listened to a supposed specialist from a peaceful country.

As he did, he spoke words that were swept away by the wind.

"It really isn't that simple."

Part 11

“Ding, ding, ding, dong. It is now two o’clock and time for a relaxing afternoon oasis courtesy of the Queen’s Café.”

“Salem Logistics is introducing a brand new online shopping system. Order on your smartphone and the product is guaranteed to arrive anywhere on the globe within twelve hours.”

“Leave the first song to me. I’ve got the perfect thing to put you in a good mood. It’s a classic from when the band Boy Racer still had some sanity left.”

Inside the cockpit used to control a machine measuring over fifty meters and weighing over two hundred thousand tons, the Princess was swallowed up by a deluge of sound.

She had chosen not to eliminate any of the voices being broadcast over the same frequency because she was desperate for as much information as she could get.

An explosion had occurred directly below her and an unbelievable amount of underground water had leaked out.

The spot she had been in five seconds before was now a giant wetland and the puddle had grown to five kilometers. If she was caught in that, she would be trapped in the bottomless swamp and it was obvious what the other Objects would do then.

New water was continuing to well up from the countless cracks and the Baby Magnum was moving left and right in a desperate attempt to escape the net of water.

Another machine was in hot pursuit.

It used an air cushion to keep the entire Object afloat with the power of air, so unlike the Princess, it could ignore the water as it moved.

“Ho ho ho. Oh ho ho ho ho ho! Once you smell the stench of defeat, it’s too late to recover. Sorry, but this is the end for you. I’ll make sure to at least send a message and some flowers to your unit. Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!!”

“You don’t even understand how I was giving you a chance to be on the winning side, do you? That head of yours really is empty, isn’t it?”

“I will answer all of your questions after I’ve won. Oh, and after we win the Gigant Hustler, I’ll make sure to look after your defeated soldiers. It would be a shame to let that bomb-using student’s talents continue being wasted with you.”

“I will destroy you.”

“Oh ho ho. How could you possibly-…bwah!?”

Countless shells flew from the fleeing Baby Magnum, but they were not fired by its seven main cannons. The Princess was firing the many railguns and coilguns attached all over the spherical body.

Those were not enough to damage the Rush, but that was not her intention.

By sending a downpour of shells toward the Oh ho ho’s feet, the ground was filled with holes.

An air cushion device kept the two hundred thousand ton Object afloat using a massive layer of air.

It could compensate for irregular terrain by scanning it with lasers and ultrasonic waves ahead of time, but what happened when the ground below underwent such a rapid change?

The Rush shook violently.

The Oh ho ho used the giant chainsaw-like treads attached as secondary propulsion devices to forcibly regain her balance.

“Wha- Ah, wait!?”

“I hope you get motion sickness and barf. It’s time you learned air cushions aren’t perfect!!”

The two Objects seemed to kick off the ground as they moved at sharp angles and aimed their main cannons at each other.

An exchange of ultra heavy shellfire was about to begin, but then a familiar boy’s voice joined the deluge of noise filling the cockpit.

“Can you hear me, Princess? Our plan failed and you’ve been kicked out of the game of musical chairs instead of the Mobius Infinity!”

“Is that all you have to say!?”

“So…”

Quenser was not done yet.

He went on to say more.

“It doesn’t matter how many hits you take as long as you keep your life, so do everything you can to survive while we change the flow of battle again. We’ll hit the Mobius Infinity with a fatal blow, transforming it into some irresistible bait.”

The expression on the Princess’s graceful, doll-like features rarely changed, but all alone in the cockpit, she gave a look she could never let anyone else see.

“Understood. I’ll be waiting.”

Shells flew back and forth and she almost seemed to dance as she dodged them.

The transmission ended and she faced her enemy once more.

“As you can see, there’s no room for you here. You need to realize which one of us is giving off the stench of defeat! Then you can die!!”

“Oh ho ho. True love is taken by force. If you don’t understand that, you truly are a child!!”

Part 12

After ending the transmission, Quenser spoke to his awful friend.

“Let’s go, Heivia. It’s time to blow away the Mobius Infinity.”

“Are you serious? I mean, *are you serious*!? This is officially a joint military exercise and the Band Station is providing a live broadcast. Obsolete infantry aren’t going to be slaughtered by cutting-edge weaponry here, so if we stay quiet and leave the battlefield, we can escape safely!!”

“But the Baby Magnum can’t. I won’t let the Princess be disgraced while people watch from their living rooms. We’ve already worked up a sweat helping her out, so what’s wrong with sticking with that to the end?”

“Oh, goddammit!! Why couldn’t it be a filthy old man on there!? Then we could just abandon him!!”

Quenser and Heivia motivated each other while traveling across the battlefield. The Mobius Infinity had moved away from them in order to take up the optimal firing spot.

They hid behind scattered pieces of armor wreckage bigger than cars and ran through the tall grass.

“What exactly are we going to do!?”

“That’s part of what we need to look into, but I have a general idea.”

“You what?”

“Remember that first saturation attack? That colossal weapon can withstand a nuke, but it still shot down all of our missiles to avoid a direct hit.”

“The other ones did that too. Remember when the Capitalist Corporations mechanized combat engineers had all their multiple

rocket launchers shot down while we were on our way to the Mobius Infinity?"

They spoke back and forth while moving from wreckage to wreckage in quick bursts of speed.

"Then what about my musical-style false report? The Mobius Infinity immediately started firing its prized main cannons. Yet saving that secret weapon until later would have been better."

"Wasn't that because everyone was starting to gang up on it!? It probably just wanted some big fireworks to scare everyone away!"

"Yes. It 'just' wanted to do that."

Quenser's comment made no sense, but he was not done yet.

"Have you forgotten what Frolaytia said in the pre-mission briefing? With the Band Station's analysis and worldwide broadcast, it wouldn't want to fire its precious weapons in front of the cameras. …It needed to scare everyone away and it had a reason worth using its main cannons despite the risk."

"Are you saying that peashooter might have been able to destroy its main cannons?"

"I doubt it's that simple, but it feared something. We need to hunt it down and crush it with pinpoint accuracy. That has to be the shortest route to catching the last train out of here."

That was when they heard a rustling of grass and Heivia held up his assault rifle.

"!! Why now!?"

"Wait, Heivia, it's the Faith Organization Valkyries!!"

"So what!? Do you not want to kill them because it's a women-only unit!?"

Even as he shouted back, Heivia was confused by the lack of bullets flying their way.

“Their Objects were the Self Deception and the Sand Cluster, so they don’t have anything left. They won’t want to attack another army’s unit right now. If we asked for supporting fire, they’d be blown to bits.”

Most likely, Quenser and Heivia had only heard the rustling grass because the Valkyries had intentionally given away their position. If they seemed too powerful, an enemy might feel the need to kill them.

Heivia clicked his tongue and aimed his assault rifle a little further upwards.

“Sorry, but I’ve got somewhere I have to be, so I don’t have time for you ladies! …I’ll overlook you for now, so make sure to give me your email addresses later.”

He was answered with a warning shot over his head.

The two idiots and the Valkyries passed each other by and continued toward their respective destinations.

“There it is. It’s the Mobius Infinity. …Hey, Quenser, let’s spy on it from behind that leg-like wreckage over there.”

The other Objects were not going to start attacking the Mobius Infinity and it did not want to leave its optimal firing position, so it only made quick movements here and there instead of rushing all throughout the forty square kilometer battlefield. If it had done that, Quenser and Heivia could never have kept up.

“Let’s check out those main cannons.”

Quenser used binoculars to view the back of the Object.

“They’re supported at one point. The giant cylinder is just attached horizontally to the back.”

“That’s the standard method used on tanks and battleships, right? Is there really a weakness there?”

“…No.”

Quenser tilted his head back without removing the binoculars.

He seemed to be focused on the very top of the three main cannons towering above them.

“That’s exactly it. Tank and battleship guns are both attached at one point, but their concepts are entirely different. Do you know why, Heivia?”

“What? Because the battleship guns are way bigger?”

“Close, but no cigar.” Quenser looked entirely serious as he answered Heivia’s joking reply. “The answer is that tank guns are much thinner. When positioned horizontally, the end of the barrel bends under its own weight. …Check out the end of the Mobius Infinity’s main cannons, Heivia. Isn’t it a little curved like it’s made from glass fiber?”

“What? Can you even use a bent cannon!? The shell wouldn’t go where you aimed it and it might even blow up inside the barrel!”

“Long ago, they apparently used to intentionally shift their aim a little for the first shot. The heat of the shot would straighten the barrel afterwards, so they would fine-tune their aim based on that.”

“I’ve never heard of that. Do the Princess and the Oh ho ho do that too?”

“No, this technology is probably unique to the Mobius Infinity.”

“I seriously doubt it. That thing fires it shells to extreme high altitude and drops them back down to create destruction on the level of a meteor strike. They wouldn’t use such an analog method to determine the exact bend of the barrel.”

“Tanks have advanced since those times, so let’s follow those advances to their conclusion.”

Quenser focused his mind on the nearly vertical cannon barrels as if stroking his fingertips along the kilometer long metal towers.

“Basically, they have to make sure the metal cannon doesn’t bend

under its own weight or heat. The easiest method is to cool the entire cannon. One method is to use a thermal jacket. That's a system that places a container of water over the barrel to constantly cool it with the power of water."

"Then is that what's going on here?"

"No, the thermal jacket itself was a failure. This has either overcome its weaknesses or is using a system from a later age."

"Like?"

"Attaching small mirrors to the barrel and sending infrared lasers out from the base. The reflected light can be used to determine the bend, so the targeting information can be corrected before firing. I believe that's the method our tanks use."

But from a distance, it was difficult to determine what method was being used here.

Quenser waved the flat monitor to the shoulder-fired missile set.

"Heivia, can we use this to access the military database? The intelligence division has to have been investigating the Mobius Infinity."

"Do you really think their report is going to have a big red circle labelled 'there's a weakness here'? If so, we would have been given a different plan."

"…"

Quenser fell silent for a moment.

"Then it doesn't have to be the military database. What about the normal internet?"

"Hey, wait. Don't tell me you just want to check on your favorite swimsuit model's blog!"

"No, that isn't it. The Information Alliance's Second Generation Band Station broadcasts a TV show which gives out tons of prize

money to any normal people who come up with an Object's weakness, right? Don't you feel like taking a peek at that show's official site?"

The two of them fiddled with the monitor's settings until they somehow managed to access the normal internet.

The site's address was easily found: it was painted in giant letters on the side of the Band Station.

In order to gather information from as many people around the world as possible, the site did not require an ID or password.

However…

"Are you serious? There's a ton of posts here. Do we really have to look through all of this?"

"That's what happens when you get billions of people fighting over a ton of prize money. The scariest thing out there is human greed."

"Not that we're any better. …Anyway, will this really help? It all looks like posts from safe country amateurs."

"Well, I'm not one to talk since I'm only a student."

Fortunately, the high-priority posts (i.e. the ones closest to the prize money) were ranked and marked with different colors. Rookies were meant to use the top opinions as a starting point to further pursue the truth. That structure intentionally fostered a dead heat situation.

The two idiots read through only the posts marked with the highest priority.

"The heat distribution over the barrels is incredibly low. They probably use a thermal jacket that surrounds the cannon in a giant water tank."

"The cannons have several protrusions surrounding the barrel at about two-thirds out from the base. They might be mirrors for infrared lasers, but I doubt they would use something that would break from the shockwaves."

“If they’re using a thermal jacket, there would be a deviation in the heat distribution just like the surface of bathwater growing hotter than the rest. Maybe they’re using propellers or jets to continually stir up the liquid inside.”

Heivia looked up from the screen in disgust and looked to the true monster on the other end of the scenery.

“So which is it? Don’t tell me it uses both a thermal jacket *and* lasers.”

“I don’t mind if it does,” replied Quenser. “As far as I’m concerned, it can use both or it can use some magical new technology that uses the heat distribution of the thermal jacket to freely bend the barrel and increase its accuracy. Either way, they still have to rely on lasers to get the information needed to adjust their aim, so we just have to destroy those. If we destroy the laser oscillators or the reflectors, it won’t be able to use its main cannons. Who cares how powerful it is if it can’t hit?”

“Come to think of it, the false report we let the enemy intercept mentioned ‘ebony soot’, didn’t it? If that’s what got it so worked up…”

“Did it not want anyone to know dirtying its reflectors would create an opening?”

“But even the amateurs online were saying its weakness couldn’t just be the mirrors. It won’t be that simple.”

“And that’s why we still have work to do here on the scene. There has to be something there that made it panic, so let’s go, Heivia.”

“Go where!?”

“If we can’t see the answer from here, we just have to get closer until we can.”

Quenser moved out from their cover and started approaching the Mobius Infinity.

Heivia groaned but ultimately followed.

“I really think it’s about time to abandon you for once.”

“You make it sound like you’ve been saving me from myself each time, but without me, you’d have died long ago.”

Just as they started arguing, they heard a dull sound and the main cannon on one side tilted forward. The giant railgun had resembled a vertical tower before, but it now took a horizontal angle like a tank’s gun.

“Wait, what’s going on? It’s collapsing, Quenser! What the hell is going on!?”

“It’s not collapsing. It’s aiming?”

It was not aiming at them, but still…

“Uh, oh.”

With a deafening roar, a metal shell was fired at terrifying speed. The side effects of it splitting the air were enough to throw the two idiots forcefully to the ground.

At the moment, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s two Objects were fighting. The Baby Magnum was being exposed to concentrated fire and the Royal Residence was fighting a defensive battle to shield the other since it was large enough to take a fair bit of damage without issue.

The shell flew horizontally into the middle of that.

And it did so in the shape of a figure eight tilted on its side, an infinity sign, or a Mobius strip.

The shell passed right by the Royal Residence, flew in a large arc in the distance, and shot back in to hit the Baby Magnum from behind.

The sound of destruction rang throughout the battlefield.

The shell had struck the structure containing the attachments for the arms supporting the seven main cannons.

“Shit!! Sparks just flew from the back!”

“I can’t believe that bastard. …Did it just fire that giant shell like a boomerang!?”

Quenser and Heivia shouted their surprise despite having their breath knocked from them after landing on their back.

The series of events had occurred too quickly to see with the naked eye, but they had managed to see a tremendous shower of sparks flying from the Baby Magnum’s rear attachment joints. The Object was still moving, but it had taken quite a bit of damage. It was possible all of its main cannons had been taken out.

Quenser got up on top of the flattened grass and spoke aloud to reassure himself.

“It’s fine. The reactor wasn’t hit and it didn’t add on the force of gravity like normal, so it wasn’t as powerful. So this is fine.”

“How about you worry about us before anyone else!? …Hm? What’s this?”

Heivia stopped complaining and wiped something cold from his cheek.

He had thought it was rain, but it was not.

The substance he had wiped onto the back of his hand was melting, but it seemed to have been a snow crystal.

“Really, what is this? Aren’t we in Southern Africa during the summer?”

“Wait. Could the contents of the thermal jacket be leaking? …No, probably not. But if this isn’t a special coolant, then where’d the ice come from?”

Quenser once more observed the scenery cautiously ruled by the Mobius Infinity and spotted quite a few white, cotton-like objects falling from the sky. It did indeed look a lot more like snow than water or ice.

He spotted one that fell on a blade of grass and, without touching it, pulled out a loupe like a jeweler would use.

It was a personal possession he had brought along in case he could steal some technology from a destroyed Object. Carrying it with him was of course against military regulations, so he was prepared to have Frolaytia kick his ass if she found out.

“It really is ice with bonds at 120 degrees, so it’s definitely a snow crystal. Although each and every one of them has the exact same shape.”

“That doesn’t sound natural then. Where’s it coming from? What part of the Mobius Infinity is frozen!?”

“It started falling when it fired, so is it related to the main cannons? Are the shells coated in ice? Or the inside of the barrel?”

“Hey, wait!”

Heivia raised his voice when Quenser licked the mystery ice crystal.

“It has no flavor… That means I’m wrong. Those main cannons are railguns. If the inside of the barrels or the shells were coated in ice, they’d definitely use salt to raise the conductivity. But then what could it-…?”

Quenser trailed off, frantically grabbed his binoculars, and stared up at the Mobius Infinity’s main cannons again.

“...There it is.”

“There what is?”

“There are small protrusions on the side of the cannon barrels. They’re reflectors for detecting the bend with lasers. It’s blowing in ice crystals to make the reflectors instead of using normal glass!!”

Part 13

The protrusions were only about the size of hand mirrors.

Lasers were a convenient way to detect the bend caused by a barrel's weight or heat, but they were not perfect.

The very nature of the method required the reflectors to be exposed on the outside.

And as mirrors, the reflectors were easily broken.

Plus, they would not work as well if dust or paint got on them.

Since they were the key to making targeting corrections, the shells would not hit if they were taken out. It was a lot like breaking a sniper rifle's scope.

That may not have been a huge issue for a normal tank. The reflectors could simply be replaced whenever they broke. However, an Object was a weapon made to endure a nuclear attack. If it would fail to work after a direct hit from shockwaves, nuclear fallout, and heat spread evenly across its surface, it never would have been adopted as a crucial part of the main cannons.

"That's why the Mobius Infinity makes new reflectors." Quenser gulped. "Instead of using indestructible mirrors, it uses ones that can be replaced as soon as they break. The snow crystals are made by gathering moisture around the dust in the air and then freezing it. It probably uses nanotechnology to create the core and sprays supercooled water around it to complete the crystal. Unlike normal snow, the crystal didn't 'just so happen' to take this shape. Like a photonic crystal, this is artificial snow designed to have the optimal design for bending the lasers."

"But…what are we supposed to do?" Heivia was confused. "I get the concept, but that's not a weakness! We can fire all the missiles in the world at it or dump an ocean of paint on it, but it can keep blowing in new reflectors. There's no point in even trying to take on

infinitely reproducible mirrors!”

“Don’t be so sure.”

Quenser grinned and did the last thing Heivia had expected.

Despite his apparent confidence, he grabbed the flat monitor to access the official site for the Band Station’s prize show.

“Wait. After all this, you’re relying on other people’s knowledge?”

“Quite the opposite,” replied Quenser. “After risking our lives so much, doesn’t our measly pay seem a little lacking? Don’t you want to post our ‘answer’ in the hopes of hitting the jackpot?”

Part 14

The Princess was just about at her limit.

She was under attack from several Objects, including the Rush, and the Mobius Infinity was firing boomerang-like horizontal shots. With two or three attacks arriving at any one moment, she was gradually running out of space to escape.

For one thing, clean wars were decided by the number of Objects.

One-against-two was considered near hopeless and one-against-three was to be avoided at all costs.

She knew her luck would run out sooner or later.

“Oh, dear. You aren’t using your precious main cannons? Are they broken…or are you pretending they are for a chance at a surprise attack? But do you really think the Information Alliance would fall for a cheap trick like that? Oh ho ho.”

“You really are stupid. Throwing away your own options like this will only leave you all alone to be crushed by the Mobius Infinity.”

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Do you think fighting is the only way to wage war? This is the problem with you uncivilized Legitimacy Kingdom Elites.”

“…?”

“I have a reset button.”

The Information Alliance grim reaper laughed over the radio while firing her rapid-fire beam Gatling cannon that combined thousands or tens of thousands of electron beams that were each powerful enough to tear into a shelter.

“This is the world’s largest battlefield, but it is officially known as a joint military exercise. I can use those two facts to my advantage. If things are looking bad, I can have the truth leaked via a variety of

routes to inform the masses that a battle on the level of a world war is underway. And our ECM110 is gathering all the footage we need to prove it."

"You…"

"Oh ho ho. Once panic spreads throughout the world, no one will have time to worry about clean wars, will they? If the higher ups don't force smiles, shake hands, and pretend to get along, the safe countries would fall apart, wouldn't they? So that makes this a reset button. Once we press it, all of the Objects will be forced to withdraw."

"You knew from the beginning you would lose? You were gloating because you had a way out so you could turn tail and run!?"

"This is war. The game of chess is not just about taking your opponent's king; it is also about keeping your own king from being taken."

She would kill as much as she could.

She would laugh as much as she could.

And once her own life was in danger, she would immediately hit the reset button and escape to safety.

This was a clean war.

These ideal wars were fought as casually as taking an overseas trip or going out for a picnic and it was assumed none of your own forces would be harmed.

"I think I'm going to throw up."

"Oh ho ho. That's exactly what I would expect from an Elite who can't even protect the infantry she brought with her."

Suddenly, a new broadcast cut in to the torrent of sounds from the many military lines and civilian broadcasts mixed together over the radio.

It was the prize show run by the Information Alliance's Band Station, which they apparently called the ECM110. A broadcast station from an enemy nation had the danger of including false information, so the Princess had not been paying much attention to it before. However, the host's tone of voice suddenly grew much calmer.

"Some incredibly useful information was just submitted. Oh, might this settle it right here!? Further work is needed to complete the acceptance of the submission form, but someone might just have won a bathtub full of dollar bills!!"

The Princess must not have been the only one to find this odd because the Oh ho ho spoke over the communication device.

"That's strange. This wasn't how the reset button was supposed to work."

A high-speed battle between several Objects was still underway, but this broadcast from a distant safe country reached the two girls' ears.

"The new theory in question comes from Billy the Kid in the Legitimacy Kingdom. …The Mobius Infinity uses lasers to detect the bend of the cannon barrels, but the reflectors are made from artificial snow created with nanotech and supercooled water. No matter how much they're broken or dirtied, it can blow in new reflectors."

"…"

"But whether natural or artificial, snow crystals are made when supercooled water covers the tiny core floating in the air."

"You don't mean…"

"If you investigated the structure and shape of the tiny cores made with nanotech, made cores with a different shape, and scattered them around the reflectors, it would create reflectors with the wrong reflectivity. Once that happens, the Mobius Infinity can't target its main cannons and will be completely defenseless. It says

here that our submitter Billy the Kid is going to demonstrate this method on site. Now this is getting exciting! How about a commercial break!?”

Part 15

Back on the battlefield, Quenser and Heivia were incredibly busy.

“Will this really defeat that Object!?”

“Weapons are a type of system, so they’re weak against unpredicted situations, just like with a computer error. It doesn’t matter how big or small it is!”

What they had done was simple.

They gathered all the artificial snow they could find scattered around the Mobius Infinity. At first, Quenser had made sure to check its shape with his loupe, but he quickly gave up on that. If they melted that snow, they would have a large number of identically-sized materials, so they poured it all into the stainless steel cup from a survival kit and placed it over a fire to get rid of all the moisture.

“Always carry a metal cup you can put oil in, huh? We need to thank that cricket chef.”

“The scary thing about survival skills is how you never know when they’ll come in handy.”

Once only the tiny cores remained, it looked like a pile of pepper almost too small to see at the bottom of the cup. Quenser stuck a spoon inside and mixed it all around as if scraping at the bottom of the cup. He was intentionally destroying the microscopic cores to change their shape.

“We’re using homemade techniques against cutting-edge nanotech. It’s too bad we can’t check to see what shape they are now.”

“All that matters is that we know the shape has changed. Once the incorrect snow crystal is made, the laser will be reflected all wrong. …More importantly, Heivia, are the missiles ready?”

“The Slingshot’s ready when you are. I’ve got a special seat reserved

inside the magic warheads that can hold anything from explosives to glue. I just have to shove these in there, right?

“We have two shots, but only one chance. We need to aim at the reflector creation points located a little over halfway up the barrels. We’re assuming the anti-air lasers will shoot it down, but we only need for the core dust to be dumped down on the reflectors. From there, its own supercooled water will create the artificial snow crystals for us.”

“Oh, damn. If that one cannon wasn’t aimed horizontally, I could’ve aimed at them all along the same line.”

“That’s my point. You have to fire one shot at the horizontal one and then another at the two vertical ones. If either misses, it’s all over. If you have any good luck charms, now would be the time.”

“Sure, sure! So what are we gonna do with the prize money once it’s in that net bank account? That prize rivals the world’s biggest lottery jackpot, so we could build a villa on the moon and live surrounded by topless girls.”

“Thinking about using it all up like that is why lottery winners tend to go broke. How about we do some day trading until someday we can buy an entire Object and fund some wars?”

“You’re the type that dumps it all into investing or gambling and ends up broke in a night, aren’t you? C’mon, let’s get started!”

Heivia rested the launcher on his shoulder and Quenser used the flat monitor for targeting support.

A long trail of smoke cut straight up through the blue sky. It reached the height of the three main cannons extending from the back of the Mobius Infinity.

A flash of light as if from welding immediately followed.

The missile’s fuel was roasted by the anti-air laser and it violently exploded in midair.

Quenser and Heivia ignored that as they loaded the next shot and

fired it into the sky as well. It too was shot down.

It looked like a perfect defense system at first and its accuracy was so great they could almost see the smirk on the Pilot Elite's face.

But Quenser and Heivia exchanged a high five.

"All right! Just like we wanted!!"

"Hey, then we need to get out of here. If that worked, it'll probably get pissed and attack us. And if it didn't work, this battlefield is going straight to hell. Either way, running away sounds like a great idea to me!!"

The two idiots exchanged a glance and turned their back on the Mobius Infinity as fast as they could. They no longer worried about leaving a trail in the tall grass and they focused on putting as much distance between themselves and the Object as possible.

An explosive sound burst from one of the tower-like main cannons.

The shockwave struck their backs and they tumbled forward. They choked as they got up and continued running on wobbly legs.

The giant metal shell had flown up into the stratosphere where it added on the gravitational acceleration as it fell back toward earth.

However, there was no Object there. One had not even taken hasty evasive action; it simply tore into already empty ground. The green plain was blown apart and a giant crater was born.

"Talk about luck! It actually worked. Ha ha. Now the Princess's life and the prize money are ours!"

"Hey, but what about the second shot? If it keeps firing, won't the snow crystals be destroyed by the shock? And won't the new ones blown in actual work?"

"The 'wrong' cores will hang around and stick to the area around the reflectors for a while, so it won't be a problem! It might have a system that uses static electricity to deflect dust and other unwanted substances, but it would be difficult to tell apart powder

of the exact same size and material. It might be like giving someone a transfusion of the wrong kind of blood!”

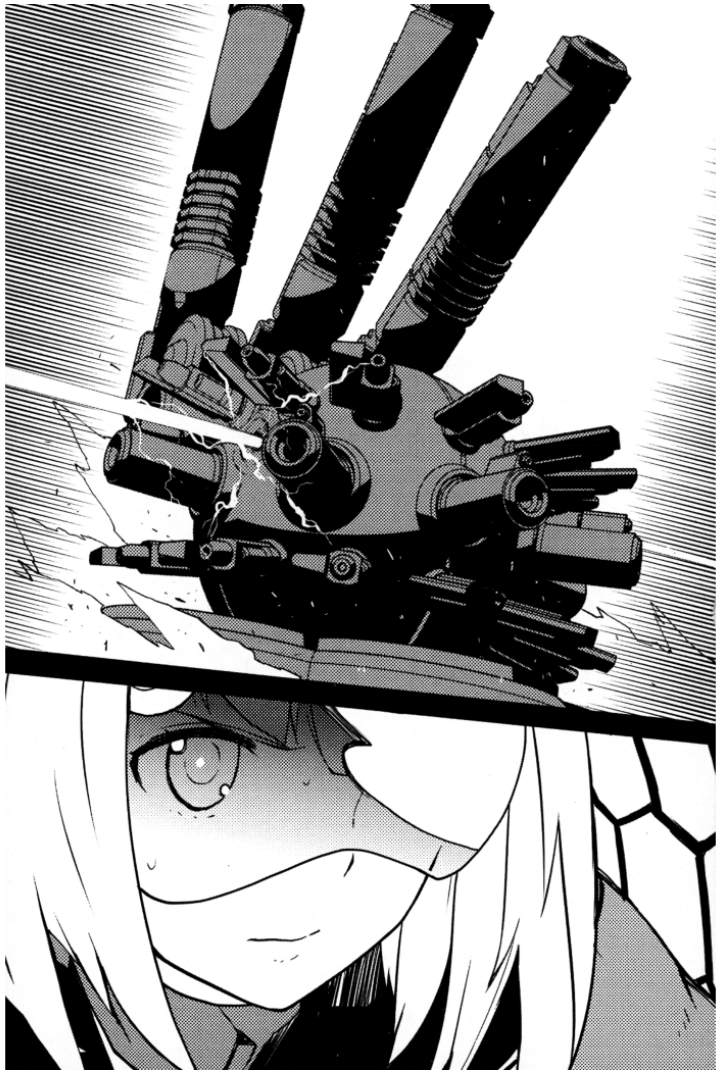
It test fired a few more times and must have concluded that all of the shells landed in the wrong spot.

A deafening creaking came from the Mobius Infinity.

The two idiots were sent tumbling to the ground with each shockwave, but now the many cannons attached to the spherical body turned their way.

They could feel clear anger on their backs that could not have come from a mere machine.

“This doesn’t look good.”



Heivia looked back and almost froze in place.

“This really doesn’t look good!! Any one of an Object’s cannons can turn us to mincemeat! And I doubt we can escape its sensors at this point!!”

They immediately changed direction and leaped behind the wreckage of an Object’s armor lying nearby, but they had no clue how effective it would be.

However, something else happened before that defense had to be tested.

A low-stability plasma cannon blast punched through the Mobius Infinity as if stabbing it in the side.

“What…!?”

“It was the Princess… She finished it off in the very, very end!!”

In a way, hiding behind the armor wreckage may have been the right decision.

The overwhelming surge that followed completely overturned the definitions of sound and light. They felt like even the backs of their eyeballs were scorched white and they lost all sense of up or down. Quenser thought the ground was shaking like a small boat rocking in the waves, but after more than half a minute, he realized it was actually his own limbs convulsing unnaturally. It took him another half minute to remember how to stop his body from moving.

Part 16

The Baby Magnum fired its main cannon right by the Oh ho ho's Rush. It pierced through and destroyed the Mobius Infinity which had been using that area as a safe zone.

The absence of that one Object turned the situation on its head.

The Gigant Hustler was the world's greatest battle which included eight Objects, but it was also a massive psychological battle between the Pilot Elites.

The Mobius Infinity had been defeated despite being the strongest one there.

That title had been taken by the Baby Magnum.

And which Object was most obviously attacking the Baby Magnum while having lost one of its main cannons?

If the other Elites wanted to be on the winning team, who would they turn against now?

"Ho…oh ho ho…"

"Checkmate," muttered the Princess.

A moment later, the remaining Objects except for the Band Station which was also from the Information Alliance (i.e. the Legitimacy Kingdom's Baby Magnum and Royal Residence and the Capitalist Corporations' Spider Joust) all focused on that one Object.

"Quenser kept his promise. I won't let you have him."

The Oh ho ho's ally, the Band Station, was still an Object, but it would be overpowered in a head-on shootout. Plus, the Rush was damaged and not in top form. Not to mention that the three-against-two structure meant they would be overpowered and killed eventually regardless.

A number of thoughts had to be spiraling through the Oh ho ho's mind.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance both had two Objects while the Capitalist Corporations had one. Could she get the neutral Spider Joust to join her and overturn the current majority?

Or could she hold onto her life by immediately destroying the isolated Spider Joust?

But at the same time, she had to have realized something else.

The Princess would undoubtedly target her first and that Princess had taken control of this situation.

She had no freedom of choice here.

Even a second's hesitation could easily leave the Rush punched full of holes without even giving her time to eject.

"E-ECM110."

So…

"Hit the reset button!! Now!!"

With those few words, the "exercise" was revealed to the world to be a "war".

Comments on the internet exploded and news sites were flooded.

The people in the stands and in the safe countries had learned this was a very real danger.

That villainous switch left no option but to forcibly end the world's largest battle.

And that naturally meant admitting defeat against the enemy before their eyes.

Part 17

The Gigant Hustler exercise was cancelled due to “unforeseen trouble”, so Quenser and Heivia were being carried from the battle line in a large transport helicopter.

Not many soldiers had ever had a chance to look down at Objects and all their anti-air lasers from a helicopter. One of the Legitimacy Kingdom infantry on the same helicopter was trying to film the Object from above with his camera.

“Large transport helicopters are weak to crosswinds, so lean out too much and you might get dumped out,” warned Heivia. “Anyway, we’ve really got ourselves a bath full of dollar bills. How many million is that in euros? It might even be ten million euros. Even if we’re splitting it between the two of us, it’s still more than enough to live on easy street for the rest of our lives.”

“We won’t get it right away. I’m sure the other participants will try to protest. It’ll probably show up in the bank account after the TV show finishes shooting down all those complaints. Let’s try to take it easy while we wait for Santa’s visit.”

“Hah hah! There’s nothing like stability! We can actually just wait around now!!”

“I know what you mean. The slow life is for the people who made a ton of money and then moved out to the countryside. If you do that after failing, it just looks like you’re running away! Hah hah!!”

As the two idiots laughed vacantly in a sort of exhausted high, Frolaytia contacted them for the first time in a while.

“Hey, the electronic simulation division just told me they found signs of someone opening an illegal port over the military line and leaking highly classified military information to an Information Alliance prize show.”

“Oh, hell!! Did they get wind of this money already!?”

“Who cares? I’ll still be laughing even if they throw us in a cell for half a year! After all, a bathtub full of money is waiting for us!!”

“Sorry, but that isn’t happening,” cut in Frolaytia’s icy voice. “Even war has rules. The intelligence division is protected by a few different war treaties if they’re doing so as a means to gather intelligence, but leaking classified information to a quiz show is entirely unprecedented. The Capitalist Corporations are requesting a significant sum of damages via the international courts. Listen, a single Object costs five billion dollars and that number doesn’t shrink all that much when when converted into euros. Do you have any idea how valuable the classified intellectual property you ‘illegally’ divulged was?”

“Wait, wait, please wait!! All we did was make a submission to an official Information Alliance show. I’ve never heard of some safe country housewife being sued for that much money.”

“That’s a gray zone. After all, they’re a normal person in a safe country. Plus, the weakness is normally found by combining hundreds or even thousands of different ideas. The situation changes considerably when just one or two professionals working on site perfectly reveal an Object’s technological information. There isn’t much we can say if they accuse you of stealing and disseminating the plans, even if you didn’t do that.”

“…”

“…”

“And so the Capitalist Corporations have sent a request for damages that truly shows their love of money. …All told, it’s thirteen million dollars. Oh, would you look at that? Isn’t that the exact amount you two won on that quiz show? Having the entire army spend years fighting this in court for some worthless soldiers would be a pain in the ass and refusing could easily start a back-and-forth divulgence war of intellectual property and lists of spies, so I’ve been told to get you to pay up.”

“Those liars!! Don’t you force this crap on us! Do you want me to start another war, you greedy bastards!!”

Heivia began meaninglessly firing his assault rifle down from the helicopter's cargo door, but that was obviously not going to change a thing.

Part 18

Acre Kiss-of-Rose was the chief executive officer of Salem Logistics, one of the seven corporations that directly controlled the Capitalist Corporations' home country. Currently, his made-to-order jacket was soaked on the inside.

However, this was not due to the heat of Africa. It came from sweat brought on by a much more unpleasant feeling.

The Gigant Hustler had been both a giant battle and a giant weapons trade fair. That weapons show had a certain important objective in addition to holding sales negotiations for military weapons and threatening the opposing world powers by showing off one's technological might.

Simply put, it was to create connections.

To do that, it had been assumed that his Capitalist Corporations would win the battle fought between eight Objects. That had been the scenario set up in advance.

But it had all crumbled down around him.

One moment, Acre had been boldly swinging up his fist. The next, he had become a laughing stock. The gentlemen in suits, the ladies in dresses, and the high-ranking military officers in berets and plenty of medals had all given him false looks of pity and those faces were burned into the back of his mind. He might as well have been updating his unwritten execution list.

(I will recover.)

He had a "large physique" that was a fair bit removed from the ideal human body and he had neatly-maintained white hair and an identically-colored beard. He had aged so naturally that it looked like he had been born with hair that color.

But his eyes alone were filled with blazing light.

(No matter what happens and no matter what it takes, I will take back the respect I lost at the Gigant Hustler! Even if it means faking a largescale accident!!)

Heat filled him until it seemed he would burn out the thin circuits in his mind, but then a driver opened the back door of a black luxury car. Acre climbed in without thanking or tipping the man. In a space rivalling a small bus, he sat on the sofa and pulled a chilled bottle of champagne from the mini-fridge.

Instead of speaking to the driver directly, he used a small microphone.

“What happens next?”

“You have special evacuation training as part of the weapons show.”

“I know that! I’m asking what kind of accident we’ll be faking to recover my…no, I mean Salem Logistics’ reputation!!”

“It has all been planned out. The impression left by that battle will be wiped clean and you will stand at center stage once more. Tomorrow, the world will be shocked by the new turn history has taken, CEO.”

“As long as you understand. And just to be clear, this is for Salem as a whole, not just me.”

He was a man who had no distinction between his work and private life. An enemy of the company was an enemy of his life and his victories were the company’s victories. He was the stereotypical example of someone who would have nothing left if his job was taken from him.

So as he fidgeted with the audio set, he could not stand the relatively insignificant broadcast he found.

“Salem Logistics has announced a new generation of online shopping with their Silver Key service. This revolutionary system allows you to order something from your smartphone anywhere on the globe and have it delivered within twelve hours.”

“What is this?”

“But the system has a dark side. It’s set to use a number of routes used by air tankers, which shows just how much fuel it will consume. And consuming all that fuel requires expanding the tanker routes used to carry it. There’s a possibility the international conflicts over the Indian Ocean and Panama Canal have been strongly influenced by Salem Logistics.”

“What is going on? This audio set is broken! None of the buttons are working and it won’t even turn off!”

Only after shouting in anger and looking up did he realize that the black luxury car was driving through an area he had never seen before.

The area was nothing like the bright international airports, luxury hotels, or casinos the old man was used to seeing. It was filled with people he suspected would punch him in the jaw and steal his gold teeth not five minutes after he started walking around there.

“Let me ask again: what is going on?”

“It’s simple: first the Sixth Branch incident in the Arctic and now the pitiful defeat at the Gigant Hustler. Of course, stirring up the battlefield took some doing. I even had to dig up an underground water vein below the Legitimacy Kingdom’s First Generation.”

A mocking tone filled the driver’s voice.

“But setting that aside, this is really quite sad, CEO. All I did was claim this was part of your evacuation training and I easily abducted someone with power rivalling a head of state. The secret service readily opened the way when I told them their boss had selfishly changed his plans and that I couldn’t reveal the details. Being a one-man manager certainly has its downsides, doesn’t it?”

“You…?”

There was a questioning tone in Acre’s voice, but not because he was questioning who this was.

He was asking why this person was alive.

For one, the skilled abduction could not have been as easy as the man claimed. He would have had to overcome countless barriers to pull it off. And that went beyond the security around Acre. If this man had not had the Gigant Hustler advance as he wanted, Acre would not have been so panicked. In fact, if the negative psychological warfare of the Sixth Branch had not shown itself, the Gigant Hustler would not have happened in the first place. If any one of those pieces had not succeeded, Acre would never have taken the first step toward this abduction.

Acre knew of only one person who could so easily pull off that kind of world-scale tightrope act just to accomplish a single goal.

Meanwhile, the driver continued speaking.

“One: I am a poor man who was swallowed up by Salem Logistic’s new service, the Silver Key.

“Two: I am a feeble former spy who had already retired and started a second life in a small household in the Soberania District near the Panama Canal, but had it all taken from me by your money-driven war.

“Three: if I used the name Nyarlathotep, would you still have to ask why you haven’t been killed yet, Azathoth?”

Things had yet to truly begin.

An unmanaged war was about to start and it would be far from clean and would surpass the boundaries of a mere military exercise.

The Capitalist Corporations home country was managed by a group of seven corporations known as 7th Core.

The position at the top of one of those corporations was equivalent to being a king in the Legitimacy Kingdom.

And one such CEO’s life was at the center of the madness about to

burn through the world.

Chapter 3: The Sixth Branch in Full Bloom > > Disturbance Intervention in the Soberania District

Part 1

The Panama Canal was a major entranceway to the world's sea transportation routes and the Soberania Disturbance was fought over controlling the key to that entranceway. However, a "cleaner" justification was given.

There was a hideout for an anti-Object force in the Central American Soberania District.

That hideout was secretly training a special commando unit that specialized in largescale terrorist attacks on safe country metropolises.

Just north of the Soberania District was western North America, the home country of the Capitalist Corporations.

The special commando unit could create deadly weapons out of everyday items like detergent and compressed gas cylinders, were skilled at slipping into countries undetected, and most importantly, were as elusive as ghosts. The police force in charge of protecting the cities would be helpless, and even the intelligence agencies that worked in secret only had a fifty-fifty chance of capturing them.

Once they arrived, the concept of the "safe country" would collapse. No one could imagine how many cities would sink into rubble.

So they needed to be defeated before that happened.

They needed to be killed before their northward operation began.

"There was no special commando unit. The supposed training camp was nothing more than a digital detox nature camp set up by a tour company from your Capitalist Corporations. You sent young people out there and punished them as villains while they were none the wiser. It was quite the setup. You used overblown reports and doctored photos to get them registered as a truly frightening combat squad."

The man spat out the words.

The square space was surrounded by metal walls and everything was blotted out by darkness.

“Saying you slaughtered them because you wanted the Panama Canal would damage the reputation of a great nation. Compromising with international society sure isn’t easy.”

“…”

“But thanks to that farce, my family is dead.”

His voice remained flat, which made it terrifying in a different way from an angry shout.

That man was said to have a thousand faces, so the standard expressions may have been meaningless to him.

“The funny part is that I had my skills as Nyarlathotep, but I had completely forgotten them as my family was killed before my eyes. I was so afraid of bringing those deadly skills into that small household that I used self-suggestion to fully seal them away. Do you understand now? It was the shock of seeing my family die that broke the seal of Nyarlathotep. If it had broken just a few minutes… no, just a few seconds early, it all might have turned out differently.”

His voice sounded like dripping coal tar and it was likely directly linked to his emotions and expression. After undergoing so much cosmetic surgery, he had completely forgotten the proper face he had been born with. His face may have melted in the darkness and splattered all over the floor.

“Laugh.”

That word felt like strength slowly building into a supposedly safe rubber knife until it stabbed into someone’s body.

That was the cruelest method that brought far more pain and fear than a simple sharp blade.

“You’re supposed to laugh at times like this, CEO. Or should I call you Azathoth?”

“Why…?”

That single word spoken by an old man sounded like forcing it out had worn an entire year off his life.

“Why don’t you just kill me already?”

“A death changes meaning entirely depending on the circumstances. In a back alley, you would be a victim. On a battlefield, you would be a war hero. At the execution grounds, you would be a despicable criminal. So I need the proper place to kill you. You already know where I’m taking you, don’t you?”

“You can’t mean…”

“Welcome to my home, the hell that was once the Soberania District.”

A metal door opened wide with a creak and a rusty smell.

Only then did the old man realize they were inside a container loaded on a ship.

They were surrounded by the colors red and black.

The entire sky seemed to be dyed in the colors of twilight, but it was not. It all came from the fires of war. The wreckage of homes, the historical remnants, the vast swaths of nature, and the people who had lived there had been mercilessly piled up and burned as the fuel for these crimson flames.

The idea of clean wars did not apply in the slightest. It was a literal hell.

And this apocalyptic scene had been created by Acre Kiss-of-Rose, CEO of Salem Logistics.

“We’ve arrived at the stage.”

Despite the red and black coloring the world, Nyarlathotep relaxed his entire body with an expression that said “I’m home”.

With a heavy sound, he pressed his palms against something, but it was not a table. It was a giant wooden barrel filled with something incredibly heavy.

“Now, how about we get started? You wanted the Panama Canal so badly, so that’s where I’ll kill you. So make sure you appreciate the effort I’m going to here, Azathoth.”

Part 2

“This entire situation makes my head hurt.”

Frolaytia’s words were in stark contrast to how she was lounging on a beach chair and re-crossing her legs while staring up into the sky.

She had removed her usual stuffy uniform and now only wore a white blouse over a brightly-colored bikini. The strings on the sides of the bottom were only loosely tied, so the knots looked about to come apart just from the fidgeting of her legs.

“During the Gigant Hustler, Acre Kiss-of-Rose, CEO of Salem Logistics and thus one ruler of 7th Core which controls the Capitalist Corporations’ home country, was abducted. I’d love to say that doesn’t matter since he’s the VIP of an enemy nation, but for better or for worse, this has been far too influential. The waves have even reached us in the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

Quenser and Heivia were of course not paying a lick of attention to their silver-haired huge-breasted commander.

They may have looked like they were obediently hanging on her every word, but they were actually staring at the bottom of her shirt (or rather, at what lay within the shirt) from directly in front of her.

“(I’m scared. Why is Frolaytia giving us a treat like this out of the blue? It feels like watching swarms of bugs moving away before a natural disaster strikes.)”

“(Then move out of the way! And quit crouching down for a better look! You’re being too obvious!! Besides, I don’t care if this is a trap! I’m gonna milk it for all it’s worth. So outta the way!! Outta the way!!!!)”

“(There has to be something more to this. Something’s coming that she has to distract us from.)”

Despite their fears, the two subordinates continued trying to send strange telepathic waves to the knots at Frolaytia's hips.

Meanwhile, she continued talking.

"He was apparently abducted by a Capitalist Corporations' spy, but the problem is where he was taken: the blank region of the Soberania District. It borders the Panama Canal, that world-famous entrance to the sea, and it's the hottest battlefield at the moment. I'm sure you've seen the term 'Soberania Disturbance' pop up as a top search when you've opened a search engine."

"Hm? Didn't the Capitalist Corporations send a large unit to the Soberania District to eliminate some special commandos being secretly trained to attack safe countries?"

"Yes, but the existence of those commandos is extremely suspect."

Frolaytia spread and closed her toes.

To the north of the precious Panama Canal is the Capitalist Corporations' Azuero District and to the south is the Soberania District. …The conflict is officially known as a clash between those two districts, but in reality, the Legitimacy Kingdom has sent quite a few military advisors to the Soberania District to trip up the Capitalist Corporations. The point is to thoroughly train them in things that a regular army will hate. So if that CEO is brought there and killed, who do you think the blame will fall on?"

"Just to be clear, it really was a Capitalist Corporations spy that did it, right?"

"Yes, but will international society believe that?" Frolaytia sounded as melancholic as the morning of her period. "The Capitalist Corporations has to be hoping to find someone else's secret stash of cash in the rubble after the devastating hurricane blows away their house. That means this could lead to war. If we're falsely accused of directly attacking a 7th Core CEO, I can't even imagine how far the madness will spread. …It could even start a world war that erases the boundaries between safe and battlefield countries. If they distort the death of one of their seven corporations' leaders into an attack

on their home country, that could quickly become no laughing matter."

"…"

"…"

Quenser and Heivia fell silent at that.

If the bikini knot effect(?) had not already gathered their blood in their lower bodies, they might have been fighting over a shovel to dig their own shelter.

"So our job this time is to rescue a VIP. …Even if that VIP is the enemy boss. Before Armageddon breaks out, we need to find the spy hiding in the Soberania District and secure CEO Acre who that spy abducted. Do you get the situation now?"

"I get that it's a dangerous situation, but why us? If things are that bad, wouldn't it make sense to send in some special forces with masks over their faces and medals covering their chests?"

"Not everyone sees the danger quite so clearly."

Frolaytia started crossing her legs again but instead rolled onto her side on the beach chair. This put even more of a burden on the bikini's knot.

"I'll explain the geographical layout now. To the north is the Capitalist Corporations' Azuero District, to the south is the Soberania District where the Legitimacy Kingdom is helping out, and in between is the eighty kilometer Panama Canal. The Panama Canal is a demilitarized zone, so neither army is allowed inside. … The canal is a lot more complicated than a simple waterway, but do you know why?"

"If I remember right, it doesn't have just one set water height. Several water gates and pumps are used to raise or lower the ships in stages like an elevator using water."

"And if that system were destroyed, taking control of the Panama Canal would be meaningless, so no soldiers are allowed in. The only

people who are allowed there are the Blue Cross, an international peace organization that is working to maintain and preserve the water gates and pumps."

"Don't tell me…"

"The spy in question has moved deep into the demilitarized zone. We will naturally have to follow suit to pursue him, but it would be an international incident if we're caught. We can't be spotted by the civilian Blue Cross, and if we are, we have to take some rather severe 'emergency measures'. …The heroes in black masks don't want to act here for fear of being caught by trap cameras and talked about around the globe or of having to shoot civilians and dirty the reputation of their unseen career."

"They're refusing the mission in a situation like this?"

"That gets down to the nature of special forces. They're meant to thread the needle and complete their jobs under the best of conditions, so they have a greater authority to refuse missions than normal units. They're even allowed to turn them down because they're on their period or having a fight with a sibling."

Quenser groaned at his busty commander's words.

It may have sounded soft for supposed special forces, but no matter how experienced they were, soldiers were still human. Even if they had a number of mental switches that allowed them to kill without fear or guilt, they still could not handle situations that stepped outside that.

For example, if the enemy soldiers cruelly slaughtered civilians, they could probably stuff those corpses into body bags.

For example, if they failed to rescue a hostage, they could probably face that dead body without issue.

But they would not be able to personally aim their guns at the vitals of perfectly innocent civilians and pull the trigger.

So what if their own mistake would create a situation in which they had to kill civilians themselves?

Their unwavering sense of justice gave them the resolve needed to dirty their own hands to protect the current age, but that very justice would completely shatter from a single mistake.

However…

“Are you serious? But the world is in as precarious a situation as a vase about to be knocked to the floor by the giant ass of a clumsy maid. What good are special forces if they can’t act under special circumstances?”

“I agree with you there, but unfortunately, the abduction occurred during the Gigant Hustler we were taking part in. No one else wants to do this shitty job, so it’s been deemed our ‘responsibility’. Are you impressed I had the courage not to break that carefree brigadier general’s jaw?”

“Are you sure they aren’t getting back at us because they didn’t like that an outdated First Generation won the Gigant Hustler?”

Quenser spat out the words, but Frolaytia neither confirmed nor denied the possibility.

She rolled onto her back again before continuing.

“Officially, the Baby Magnum is being sent to the southern Soberania District to hold the Second Generation Extra Arc in check with long-range fire. And while the spotlight is shining on the Princess, you all need to walk along the dimly-lit catwalk and crush that pesky bug. The assassination and rescue operation will be carried out by our stars in the shadows, the intelligence division, but don’t trip them up. Use every skill you have to help them as much as possible. That is all.”

With that said, Frolaytia raised her slender white legs straight up. She then swung them like a pendulum to gather momentum and stand up from the beach chair. Even then, the bikini's side knots did not come undone.

They were not at the beach of a luxury resort or on the deck of a luxury cruise ship.

This was a manmade floating island built in a square shape with two kilometer sides.

That megafloat beachhead was known as the Garden Gate, it was floating alongside the Soberania District which was wrapped in the flames of war and the large curve of the Panama Bay, and she stood barefoot on its reinforced stainless steel surface.

She cracked her neck while looking just a few kilometers ahead, where crimson flames and black smoke filled both the ground and the sky.

"Now, we have our work cut out for us today too. Let's line up the pieces on the board and begin the ladies and gentlemen's game."

Part 3

And so…

“This is stupid.”

Quenser’s voice was muffled.

He was wearing something like a thick raincoat over his uniform. The material resembled the fire-resistant cloth that firefighters wore and its shiny surface was incredibly bad for his heart after growing so used to normal camouflage. He felt like he was holding up a placard saying “please spot me” with his email address at the bottom.

“What’s the temperature right now? Not only are we almost right on the equator, but there are fires burning all over the place. I’m sweating like crazy and I’m pretty sure heatstroke is going to kill me before any bullet has the chance.”

“It’s 75 degrees Celsius, but don’t take that thing off. It’s like a sauna out there.”

“Can’t they use a meteorological weapon to make it rain? Why did they even make those things?”

“Don’t be stupid. Adding more moisture would only steam us to death.”

Heivia was also part of the shiny team that included the intelligence division.

“Besides, the Extra Arc is watching from the other side of the canal. Without these sensor-blocking cloaks, we’d be spotted right away and on our way to an international incident.”

“I can’t believe it’s this hot when we’re still upwind. …And do you really think these things will help? If they did, I would think the age of Objects would have ended a lot sooner.”

“Better to have it than not. Especially when the government’s tax money is paying for it.”

They were walking through what had once been a metropolis of metal and concrete, but there was no sign of it now. The structures had not so much burned or crumbled as they had melted. It was not often that not just the metal and plastic but even the concrete would completely melt.

That was the result of Objects firing back and forth at each other from north and south of the canal.

In places, the way forward was blocked by orange rivers or by solid black objects where it had cooled, so Quenser spoke up in annoyance.

“What century have we wandered into? What ever happened to clean wars?”

“Let’s just hope everyone made it to the refugee camp set up by the Blue Cross. If anyone was left here, they wouldn’t have survived. Even divine miracles would run out of gas about an hour into it.”

They knew what had caused this and it had done so without directly showing up here. It had instead fired long-distance from beyond the Panama Canal.

“The Capitalist Corporations Second Generation Extra Arc, huh?”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it? It uses low-stability plasma cannons, but the light and heat is so far off the charts that it screws with any observation equipment and the crucial moment of firing isn’t captured. Just how powerful is that thing?”

Fortunately, their objective here was not to be the dragon slayers from an opera.

They had to slip past the Object, enter the demilitarized zone of the Panama Canal, and rescue Acre Kiss-of-Rose, a Capitalist Corporations VIP. At the same time, they were to assassinate the spy who would be trying to stop them.

“And the Extra Arc belongs to Salem Logistics. It isn’t going to play around if this gets out. It might charge in to save its big boss without worrying about what kind of international incident that’ll cause.”

“The best way to survive this is to find CEO Acre, take him as a hostage, and withdraw to the beachhead while making sure he’s indebted to us. But will it really go that well?”

“If we fail to rescue him, we’ll seriously have a world war on our hands. That’s the death of a CEO of their home country, which is like a king for us. Revenge plots will boil over and the laughable clean wars will be burned away. It’ll lead to an age that could easily annihilate six billion people.”

“I’m not talking about our sense of duty or justice. I’m talking realistically.”

“Well, in that case, it comes down to the specs of the Object and the skill of the spy trying to stop us.”

“Didn’t they say there’s just the one spy and he doesn’t have a huge organization backing him up?”

“What, were you only interested in the information on that huge machine? Just listening in on the intelligence division’s discussions made my head hurt. He goes by Nyarlathotep and his real name is unknown. He’s had so much cosmetic surgery that any old documents are completely worthless. They’ve estimated that he was only active around twenty years ago and it isn’t even known if he’s alive or dead at the moment. The Legitimacy Kingdom’s intelligence division developed so rapidly because they needed to strengthen the organization after the mess he made of things all over the place. He truly is a legend.”

“Sounds like someone who would show up in a stealth spy game.”

“I wouldn’t know. Anyway, his specialty is faking his own death. In the official records alone, he’s already kicked the bucket more than thirty times and even some dictator’s kid was shot as revenge for ‘killing’ him.”

“I stand corrected. He sounds like he would be more at home in an open world zombie game.”

“I haven’t heard a single thing about him that doesn’t make me more worried. I don’t know why he’s gone after this CEO, but we can’t relax just because we’ve finished him off with a bullet or a bomb. This isn’t over till we get home. In fact, we’ll basically be on a nerve-racking test of courage until we get back.”

As he listened to Heivia, Quenser checked the weight pressing down on his right shoulder. Instead of his normal plastic explosives, he had a special device hanging from his shoulder on a sling belt.

It looked like a bullpup assault rifle (i.e. one with the grip on the front and the magazine attached on the back), but the caliber was quite large at 25mm. However, it was not the kind of fully-automatic human mixer that got the anti-war crowd so upset.

Although in a way, it could cause an even more gruesome scene if directly aimed at a human being.

“Will this thing really help?”

“I don’t understand why anyone would give that thing to an amateur who doesn’t know how to fire a handgun. It’s a sticky bomb launcher, right?”

“It’s called the War Hammer. Once you fire a jelly-like liquefied explosive plus fuse onto the wall or floor, you just have to pull the wireless trigger for a huge explosion. You can apparently stick the bombs on a car or a person’s back as they try to escape.”

“That’s just dangerous. When are we going to see an age of peace?”

“It’s not like I had a choice. This place is a hell of seventy to eighty degrees, so normal plastic explosives would melt. I can’t use my usual Hand Axe here.”

“Ahh, ahh. That reasoning is insane. It’s the same giving a child a grenade because you can’t give them a handgun.”

Heivia was complaining about more than just the War Hammer’s

specs. Even with the support of the laser sight, having a firearms amateur behind you created a very real possibility of having that “grim reaper egg” splattered onto the back of his head.

While it was true he would still be fine as long as Quenser did not pull the wireless trigger, that did nothing to slow the racing pulse of the person who had a bomb stuck to the back of their head.

“Look.”

A member of the shiny army physically pointed to gather attention and the voice muffled by the hood of stealth material could have been male or female.

“We’ve finally reached the Panama Canal. The demilitarized zone starts now, so at least the stench of burning fingernails and hair should end.”

“Hey, Heivia. What do you think about the intelligence division’s sense of humor?”

“I deal with it by assuming everyone whose face I can’t see is actually a beautiful girl.”

The eighty kilometer canal separated the American continents between north and south, but it was not that wide. It was only a little wider than a fifty meter pool, so Quenser could probably have swum to the other side if he took off his clothes and jumped in.

Both sides were entirely covered in concrete and metal rails ran along parallel to the canal. They had likely been meant to carry some kind of maintenance equipment.

Even as they approached the water, the temperature did not drop. In fact, the wind had more room, so the intense waves of heat seemed to reach them with even more force.

The canal’s waving seawater was dyed red and black because it reflected the color of the sky. It resembled the sea at twilight, but it was much more sinister looking. It looked like the perfect place for ghosts to appear in any pictures taken.

“This is awful. And the other side of the canal’s covered in a filthy industrial region. If the Soberania Disturbance goes the other way, will that desert spread to this side too?”

A three meter tall metal fence covered the opposite side for as far as the eye could see. Perhaps just to buy time, there was a second fence not far beyond it.

The area beyond that was filled with steel pipes, cylindrical tanks, and smokestacks rising into the sky. Overall, it looked like a petrochemical complex. The kilometers long facility was entirely covered in asphalt like an international airport and it looked like concrete boxes and thick silver pipes were piled up on that.

However…

“Why is that side burning too? Their double fence is completely broken.”

“How should I know? That place is perfect for hide-and-seek, so it was probably easier to create a completely unlivable space than to search out and kill any enemies that might be there.”

Regardless, the opposite side of the canal did not matter, so Quenser focused on their side.

“Where is this Nyarlathotep guy supposed to be hiding?”

“Near the Miraflores Water Gate. That’s not even two kilometers from here. …But I can already see those Blue Cross people busy preserving the canal.”

“You’re kidding. You mean the people we have to kill if they see us?”

Quenser sounded annoyed as he too spotted the people in yellow heat-resistant suits.

Heivia crouched down.

“Let’s stay low as we continue on. I don’t want to mass-produce some PTSD and suffer from nightmares for the rest of my life.”

They were wearing shiny cloaks with nothing to hide themselves, but no one seemed to notice them as they followed the concrete bank. They could of course have used some cover, but with orange flames everywhere, the fire reflected in the silver surface drew the most attention.

The intelligence division took the lead and the two idiots followed them further along the canal.

Heivia checked his sensors from time to time and some areas apparently reached an instantaneous temperature of over ninety degrees. The average sauna was around one hundred degrees, so it was enough for a human to pass out after thirty or forty minutes.

“Is this Mars? This is no place for human life.”

“Look, there’s something like a giant mountain beyond the canal. Is that the Capitalist Corporations’ Extra Arc!?”

Life returned to Quenser’s eyes once an Object was involved, but he was not given time to look back there.

A moment later, his vision was dyed in white.

“…… …… …… …… …… ……
…… …… …… …… ……
……”

For a while, he completely forgot about the passage of time.

He felt a cold liquid flowing into his mouth and finally realized that he had collapsed and Heivia was sticking a water bottle in his mouth.

“Cough, cough! Wh-what…the hell?”

“The Extra Arc fired its plasma right over our heads.”

As Heivia spoke, his hearing gradually returned.

He could hear explosive sounds, but they were not only coming from the Extra Arc. Back in the Soberania District, the Baby

magnum was firing back with its different varieties of main cannon.

Those Objects could not set foot in the Panama Canal.

They would suffer an astronomical financial loss if they destroyed the water elevator made from giant water gates and pumps.

“This time, it wasn’t about you being weak. The flash was so bright that a few of the intelligence division are still convulsing on the ground. The shock seems to fade as your eyes get used to it, but I’ll agree that isn’t something you want to look directly at.”

“You’re kidding, right? No normal low-stability plasma cannon goes that far.”

“There’s something to it that goes beyond normal. After all, this is the personal Object of one of the seven corporations that manages the Capitalist Corporations’ home country. …There’s no way I want to take on that thing. Let’s stuff that Acre bastard in a bag and get back to the beachhead.”

Quenser could understand now how the light and heat messed with cameras and sensors. The abnormal plasma was still being fired and it seemed to burn through his optic nerves to torment his brain. Heivia was right about getting used to it, so he was just barely able to avoid passing out again.

“Dammit, we should have brought welding masks with us.”

“You’d sweat so much you’d get athlete’s foot all over your face. But if you’re doing good enough to complain, then get up on your feet. I’m not about to keep nursing a guy any longer.”

He may have been imagining it, but the surrounding waves of heat seemed to have grown in intensity.

Like this, they could easily go blind before being able to see what kind of technology the Object used, so they unsteadily continued along the canal.

The previous exchange must have only been a “skirmish” because an overwhelming firefight had finally broken out.

But at the same time, Quenser and the others let out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Found it.”

That comment came from one of the intelligence division members of their shiny army.

Twenty or thirty meters up a gentle slope was a small lakeside house on a small hill.

That may have sounded nice, but it was still in the scorching hell of red and black that required heat-resistant firefighting equipment to survive even an hour. The paint on the walls was scorched and peeling, the windows were gone, and the roof was nowhere to be seen. No normal person would ever try to hide there.

“This matches the satellite photos taken through the gaps in the flames and smoke. If nothing has changed since then, Nyarlathotep should be in there.”

“Just to be clear, there were two people inside, right?”

“According to the image analysis, yes. But we can’t rely on the heat signatures since this hellish sauna drowns out any human body heat.”

They did not even know if the VIP was still alive, but they had no reason to stop here. The intelligence division silently approached the half-destroyed house and quickly spread out to cover each entrance. Quenser and Heivia helped by pressing against the wall on either side of the backdoor.

The intelligence division passed fiberscopes through the cracks in the doors or the broken windows and sent the footage to everyone’s handheld devices, so Quenser checked it all.

“There are no traps. Or at least, we shouldn’t have to worry about the spy faking his death by blowing the house to smithereens as soon as we kick down the door.”

That was the final sign needed to begin their assault.

“We may know the house’s layout, but we only know the people’s approximate locations. Killing the CEO would make all this effort worthless, so be careful not to shoot the wrong person as we rapidly check every room. On the count of three.”

After the short countdown over the radio, bullets destroyed the locks at each entrance and the intelligence division rushed inside the house.

Quenser and Heivia followed after them.

“Clear!”

“Clear!!”

There were several short bursts of gunshots muffled by suppressors.

Heivia quickly raised his assault rifle to assist, but several members of the intelligence division were already surrounding a man.

There were bullet holes in the wall and the man put his hands up at a battered table.

He wore the same kind of fire-resistant suit as the Blue Cross, but his head was exposed. He had neatly parted hair, but it looked eerily out of place like a stuffed animal floating in a muddy river.

“That isn’t Acre,” groaned Quenser as he showed up late. “Is it Nyarlathotep?”

The man with the parted hair responded from his chair in what had likely been a dining room.

“Welcome to my home, guests.”

“What are you talking about, you bastard!?”

“I don’t remember inviting you over for supper, but you are still welcome. Had the Legitimacy Kingdom not figured out that I bought this house myself by taking out a loan?”

As if to say that did not matter, an intelligence division member

grabbed the man's parted hair and slammed his face against the partially broken table.

Then they turned the man's head on its side, pulled a handgun from their holster, and shoved it against the man's head.

"Where is Acre Kiss-of-Rose, CEO of Salem Logistics?"

"He decided to take a nap. He must have been tired after our long trip from Africa."

"Answer me now. Now!!"

"You'll find him if you look. I can't guarantee you he'll wake up again, though. Have you still not figured out why I didn't put up any kind of resistance?"

Even with his head shoved against the table, Nyarlathotep's eyes seemed to be focused on some other place entirely. Quenser followed his gaze and found an opened door, a hallway, and another door.

"…"

He walked over and reached for the knob.

That simple action was enough to get his fingertips trembling.

Not even he was sure why those feelings were welling up inside him.

Some dreadful torrent of emotion was stopping his fingers from moving, just like a mother who had learned the horrifying true identity of the baby formula she had happily been feeding her young child.

It felt like his mind and body were separating.

He grabbed the knob while so unsteady he seemed to be sleepwalking.

He turned it.

With a creak, the wooden door opened away from him.

It was a dark, windowless room. It may have originally been a storage room rather than a living space and it seemed the roof here had survived. In addition to some scattered tools and a pile of broken airplane models, a wooden barrel the size of a small industrial drum sat in the middle of the dusty room.

The barrel was filled with to the brim with a massive amount of pebbles.

And like something sticking above the water's surface or an egg-shaped brooch inside a jewel box, an old man was buried in the pebbles up to the neck with his tongue hanging from his mouth.

Quenser fell to the ground and screamed.

Some intelligence division members rushed over, saw what was there, and continued on inside. They knocked the wooden barrel onto its side. Most of the pebbles were packed together in a single block. Glue, coal tar, melted rubber, caramel, or some other sticky substance may have been mixed in. In other words, the gaps had filled in and it had grown tighter as it had solidified, slowly and gradually squeezing down on the helpless old man buried inside.

The old man wore only his underwear, his eyes were sunken in, his cheeks were gaunt, and his white hair was falling out. He had looked old in the photograph they had been given, but not this much. His white hair had looked carefully maintained, but now it was coming out like an old carpet. His skin had turned red and purple, but he could no longer complain about the pain. Perhaps due to rigor mortis, his body was bent in an unnatural shape as he lay on the ground like a dried up dead insect. Was that really just the effect of the compression from the stones? How long had it been since he had gone missing? How long had he been soaking in that barrel? Was that really long enough to crush someone to death? Or…

(This wasn't an issue of the physical damage. He died of shock.)

In movies and dramas it was not uncommon to see people quickly

age or have their hair go white due to excessive fear.

But how much fear was necessary to actually reproduce that nearly legendary phenomenon?

This was the work of Nyarlathotep, an expert spy who excelled in madness and psychological change.

“Match…confirmed,” blankly muttered a member of the intelligence division. “This is definitely Acre Kiss-of-Rose, CEO of Salem Logistics. It’s him. The package is dead. I repeat, the package is dead!!”

Quenser’s entire face had paled.

It took over ten seconds for his nearby ally’s voice to enter his ears and reach his mind.

But not just because he had seen a human corpse.

This was not just a normal person like the Blue Cross people, so his death had an added meaning.

“What…do we do?”

Heivia spoke with a scratchy voice as he peered inside the room and his voice quickly rose to an almost tearfully desperate shout.

“That Acre bastard was killed!? But he led one of the seven giant corporations that control the Capitalist Corporations’ home country! That’s a VIP on the level of our royals!!”

If an enemy leader was dead, shouldn’t they be throwing their hands in the air and celebrating?

That reasoning did not apply here.

After all…

“Does this mean the end of the managed clean wars we have now…?”

Quenser looked like he had just witnessed the giant meteor strike that had caused the ice age.

This battlefield was the site of an intense competition between the Capitalist Corporations and the Legitimacy Kingdom.

If the world found out a Capitalist Corporations VIP had been brought there and killed, where would their suspicions land?

“Is this the beginning of a true war of revenge that will erase the distinction between safe and battlefield countries as it burns through six billion people!?”

Part 4

“Carry the corpse back with you. If that isn’t possible, dig a hole and burn it. Napalm, an aluminum reaction, or a grenade with some kind of chemical incendiary properties would be perfect. If the Capitalist Corporations can’t check his teeth, fingerprints, or DNA, we can just barely pull through.”

They had contacted Frolaytia for some help with their troubles, but her answer was more severe than they would have liked.

But since the blue planet Gagarin had seen was on the verge of turning red with flames, that kind of severity should not have been surprising.

“Normal gasoline or oil wouldn’t have enough firepower, so you need to make some modifications to turn it into napalm. That shouldn’t be a difficult job for a bomb specialist like you.”

“This isn’t killing the enemy before my eyes to survive. I’ll be destroying an unmoving corpse until even the bones burn away. I feel like I’m only one step away from cannibalism here.”

“You’ll have to focus on the fact that it’s better than dumping gasoline over the head of a living person who can still beg for their life. And make no mistake here. Everything you’ll be doing here is still ‘to survive’. And now the survival of another six billion people is hanging in the balance too.”

She ended her transmission there.

Quenser desperately suppressed the urge to vomit rising from the pit of his stomach and kicked the sole of his military boot against a partially broken pillar.

With that loud sound, he finally gathered his resolve.

“There’s no way we can carry him back, is there?”

One of the shiny members of the intelligence division answered

him.

“Since we’ll have to sneak past the Blue Cross on our way out, not a chance. Disposing of him here to lighten the load would be best. The garage out back had collapsed, but there was some gasoline left in the scrap metal that had been a car. Can you make napalm out of that?”

“I can manage as long as I have some cleaning supplies, some household painting supplies, a metal bowl, and the kind of mixer used to make shortcakes. They’re all a housewife’s allies, so I’ll look around for them.”

“Then you take care of that. We’ll dig a hole out back. Let’s go!”

After a few members of the intelligence division left, Quenser breathed a heavy sigh.

From there, nothing felt real and he felt like his feet were floating.

It was not easy work, but losing himself in it lessened the pressure on his heart.

The kitchen had mostly collapsed, so he placed the metal bowl on the dining room table and got to work. Naturally, Nyarlathotep sat obediently in the same room with the intelligence division aiming their guns at him.

As Quenser transformed the gasoline into jelly with the electric mixer, Nyarlathotep spoke with a smile that was strangely lacking in humanity.

“It looks like I’ve caused you all a lot of trouble. Sorry about that.”

“Why did you turn on your own big boss? You may not have known the Legitimacy Kingdom would be involved, but you had to have guessed it would cause a war somewhere in the world.”

“The Soberania Disturbance began because Salem Logistics tried to take the Panama Canal for themselves to expand their business. And this was my house. …If this is what remains of the house meant to protect my family, what do you think happened to the wife and son

who lived with me here?”

“…”

“My wife was helping the Blue Cross. She was creating a list of the people who fled to this blank region to help them register for citizenship and insurance. My only son was just five and he was so excited about getting to go to school for the first time. But all of that was taken from me by that money-worshiping piece of shit.”

What did Quenser look like to him?

What did he think of the boy creating napalm to burn away a corpse using the mixer that may very well have been used to make his son’s birthday cake?

That man had brought the entire world to the precipice, but that did not change the fact that his smaller world was being trampled on.

“That doesn’t matter.”

Quenser heard a low, low, dreadfully low voice cut in.

It belonged to Heivia Winchell.

“I don’t care what kind of life you lived or what kind of despair you carry with you. That’s no excuse for burning our homes and families to the ground!! This is…this is really why the world’s gonna end? Thousands of years of human history are going to come to an end for one guy’s private life!?”

“Hey, Heivia…?”

“Do we really need to bring this bastard back alive? Who knows when this expert illusionist of a spy is gonna slip from our fingers! Wouldn’t the world be better off if we put a bullet between his eyes!?”

“You can’t shoot him here, Heivia!!”

“Why not!? What possible reason do you have to cover for the guy

who set the world on fire!?"

"The napalm! The air here is already around a hundred degrees, so the contents of this bowl are pretty unstable. Fire your gun now and we'll all be roasted like turkeys!"

Heivia clicked his tongue.

He removed his eye from his assault rifle's sight, but he did not remove his index finger from the trigger. He was in such a state of disarray that he was completely ignoring the most basic lessons from boot camp.

"I won't run away."

The man with the neatly parted hair spoke up as if to throw oil on the fire.

He had a disturbingly thin smile on his lips.

"I've finished everything I wanted to do. After all this, I have no dreams for my future."

"…"

Heivia moved both arms and produced a sound like a swinging metal bat.

Next came the sound of Nyarlathotep's nose being broken by the rifle's stock.

The man did not even utter a groan.

Heivia tapped a member of the intelligence division on the shoulder and made his way to the dining room door.

"Call me first when it's time kill the bastard. If we're out of ammo, I'll tear out his throat with my teeth."

"The napalm's done. If you want a breath of what passes for fresh air around here, then take it to the group digging the hole out back. But tell them to detonate it with a wire and fuse, not a lighter or

matches. Otherwise, they'll end up roasting their own face with a magnificent pillar of fire."

Heivia snatched the metal bowl and finally vanished from the dining room.

Quenser toyed with the mixer still covered in sticky flammable jelly, but finally set it on the table and collapsed into a chair. He was sitting directly across from Nyarlathotep.

He glared at the man across the table that could burst into flames at any time for any reason.

"Just to be clear, I'm not on your side."

"Oh, I know."

The man with the neatly parted hair smiled but sounded like he was spitting out the words.

"If a single person in this world were on my side, I might have walked a different path."

Quenser also wanted to kill the bastard a hundred times if he could.

However, he was valuable as the "true culprit".

Quenser could not guess how much the Capitalist Corporations would learn about Acre's death or how far the chaos would spread around the world, but he knew losing the true culprit would be incredibly bad. Once the Legitimacy Kingdom and Capitalist Corporations began arguing back and forth, the truth might become as valuable as a scrap of paper, but it was still possible that a "confession" from Nyarlathotep could act as a safety switch to calm down the boiling world.

Killing him was like drilling a hole in the bottom of Noah's ark.

While it would be best for the deluge to never occur in the first place, ruining the boat before your eyes was a lot like a gentle form of suicide.

“They’ll probably be burning the corpse in the hole before long. Are you sure you shouldn’t be helping them? You seem to be the most experienced with this sort of thing.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Oh, can you kill an enemy actively attacking you, but you’re reluctant to burn a defenseless corpse? A very European way of thinking. I suppose it’s why you like to bury bodies under crosses.”

“…”

“I can’t even remember what my wife and son looked like anymore.”

Nyarlathotep continued speaking words that may or may not have been true.

“You’re wondering how I could say that when I set the entire world on fire for my family, aren’t you? But it’s true. No matter how much I try to remember those pleasant times, their charred black faces are all I can see. So I understand why your hands are trembling. That fear isn’t something you should give visual form. …But will you really finish this in time if you rely on others?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“The Capitalist Corporations aren’t stupid. If you’re trying to burn an inconvenient corpse, you should have done so as soon as possible. They’ll be here soon.”

It happened before the unease could race down Quenser’s spine.

The small house had already lost its roof, but a tremendous shock caused it to collapse altogether.

Quenser fell from his chair and the walls collapsed. In fact, fragments flew parallel to the ground as if a directional mine had gone off. Then the walls fell over with rattling sound. A great strength grabbed Quenser’s arm and pulled him under the battered table.

Surprisingly, it was Nyarlathotep who had saved him.

The lack of the roof had helped them. The amount of rubble falling from above was not enough to break through the table or bury them alive.

When he pulled himself out from below the table and rubble, a noise started hurting Quenser's ears.

It sounded like an electric fan amplified many, many times over.

That was the sound produced by the propeller of an aircraft given a reciprocating engine instead of a jet engine for longer flight times.

"Drones!!" shouted Heivia. "They got a picture from above. They saw where we were and they saw the corpse in the hole!!"

A pillar of fire loudly rose from the hole. That was the napalm Quenser had made, but it was anyone's guess how effective that would be at this point. If the corpse had been photographed from the sky before it was burnt, they might have even wrapped the noose around their own necks by burning it.

"Hey, do you think the war here'll end now that their big boss is dead!?"

"Not a chance! This'll just cause a chemical reaction transforming the rescue operation into a mission for revenge!! In fact, now that we've lost our shield, they can relax and start shooting all they want!!"

The drones in question were not fighter jets with high-level computer equipment onboard. Instead, they looked like a giant paper model with an engine attached. A whole bunch of them were flying around like dragonflies in the autumn sky. It would have been hard to get an accurate count of them all.

"Those don't carry missiles," explained Nyarlathotep as he dug through the rubble and (for some reason) pulled out a member of the intelligence division. "Do you have an Object on your side? Now that they know where you are, you don't need to hesitate to ask for some assistance. If you don't have those eyes in the sky shot

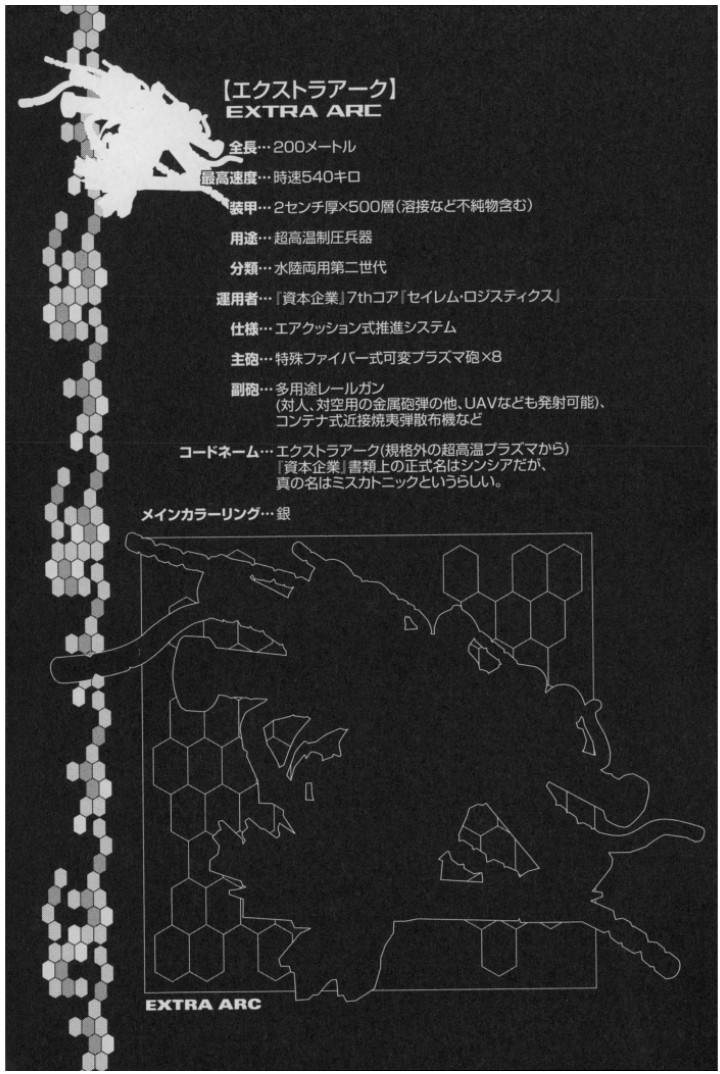
down by anti-air lasers, you'll be blown to bits by Cynthia's anti-personnel and anti-vehicle cannons. The smoke and waves of heat seem to be affecting their targeting for now, but they should correct that before long."

Quenser frowned at the man's prediction.

"Cynthia? Oh, you mean the Extra Arc. Is it linked with those drones to indirectly target us!?"

"No, both of those names are inaccurate. I guess I'm not thinking straight either," curtly replied Nyarlathotep. "Its true name not recorded on any official Capitalist Corporations documents is the Miskatonic. That is the truly cruel Second Generation personally funded by Acre Kiss-of-Rose…no, by Azathoth who was using that name."

Part 5



Even for a Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation, an absurd amount of funding and technology had been pumped into the Miskatonic. The Object represented one of the seven giant corporations making up 7th Core which directly managed their home country.

Even from the edge of the scarlet lake which reflected the burning color of the sky, it could clearly be seen deep in the giant destroyed industrial sector across the Panama Canal.

It had a bizarre design.

One look at its main cannons was enough to know that.

A giant mechanical flower spread out from the back. It was shifted upwards a little like a straw hat on someone's head. Except the flower was actually made up of giant reels and two meter wide tubes extending from them. Eight identical devices were laid out in a circle like on a clock face and the special tubes could move freely like the fiber scopes used for endoscopes.

They looked like eight snakes or the tentacles of a squishy sea creature.

The Miskatonic's main cannons were high-power plasma cannons that were fired through the tubes. It fired from different positions, at different angles, and with different timing to seal off its opponent's movements.

It was similar yet completely different from the Baby Magnum's cannons that were supported by seven arms and could be used for diffusion or convergence.

However, they did not have time to sit there analyzing its structure.

Death was pursuing Quenser and the others in the form of drones.

"This ain't good! The forest! Run into the forest, Quenser!!"

Heivia gestured toward and instructed the student as he ran.

"Get somewhere where they can't see you from the sky! Luckily, they can't use an IR search with all this heat and smoke. If we can escape the cameras, we still have a chance!!"

Quenser immediately grabbed Nyarlathotep's wrist, much to the surprise of the man with the neatly parted hair.

“You could just leave me, you know?”

“I’m not letting you use this confusion to fake your death.”

Quenser started running while dragging along a ghost who showed no desire to live.

Lots of drones were fried, blown up, and shot down overhead. That was thanks to the Baby Magnum’s anti-air support. But the surviving ones and even the ones that were shot down produced whirring sounds from their camera lenses and transmitted the fleeing soldiers’ location to the Miskatonic.

An explosive roar followed.

This was not the Object’s fierce plasma main cannon. Most likely, its many railguns and coilguns had been simultaneously fired into the sky.

It poured down just like rain.

This downpour of death was meant to crush the target even with some level of targeting error.

Its own drones were shot down as the shells rained down on the edge of the lake.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh

After a scream, Quenser flew through the air.

He could no longer feel Nyarlathotep’s wrist in his grasp, but his vision was spinning around too much to tell if he had let go or if one or the other’s arm had been blown off.

He slammed back-first into the ground and something soft fell from the heavens.

The items that had been blasted into the air with the black soil were horribly dark-red metallic-smelling clumps.

Quenser nearly tore at his hair in a panic, but a powerful strength

grabbed his arm.

Nyarlathotep was pulling him to his feet.

“Can you stand?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Run. If you aren’t ready to meet the grim reaper before finishing your job, that is.”

He fully focused himself on running.

Whether it was rain or spears falling from the sky, he forced his legs to continue moving.

He finally half-slid into the deep forest next to the lake.

Shells poured down on the forest as well and trees too thick to reach one’s arms around splintered like chopsticks.

Still, the accuracy had dropped and the shells started falling nowhere near them as they ran deeper and deeper into the forest.

It finally stopped after about ten minutes or a little more, but that hell seemed to have lasted an eternity.

Had it given up?

Or had the Princess’s anti-air support successfully shot down all of the drones?

That was Quenser’s guess as he leaned against a tree and tried to catch his breath, but then Nyarlathotep spoke up.

“Here it comes.”

The world vanished into whiteness.

Eight blasts of high-power plasma instantly filled the entire terrain with destruction.

The forest melted.

The trees were not even allowed to burn. They and the ground turned to a glowing orange liquid which formed rivers of lava.

The downpour from the heavens had been at least generally aimed, but the eight main cannons had not even done that.

The enemy had escaped into the forest, so the Object was melting the entire forest.

Instead of just wiping them off the face of the earth, it was wiping off the face of the earth too.

That was just how insane the fan-shaped attack was.

"…"

Quenser stared blankly as he slid his back down the tree trunk to sit down.

The scenery that had been there a moment before had transformed into a red river.

Nyarlathotep glanced upwards and seemed to be sniffing at something.

"No second wave… So was that all? Or it may be focusing on its battle with the Legitimacy Kingdom Object. Either way, this is our chance to escape."

A crackling sound reached their ears.

They looked over and saw Heivia unsteadily approaching while treading on the embers.

Quenser frowned.

"Hey, what happened to the intelligence division?"

"…"

"There were a ton of them with you, weren't there!? What happened to them!?"

“It’s…”

Heivia did not give a clear answer.

But the rivers of lava and his next words said enough.

“It’s time…we killed this guy.”

Heivia’s assault rifle suddenly hopped up.

Quenser immediately grabbed the firearm that hung from his shoulder.

It was the bullpup sticky bomb launcher known as the War Hammer.

Two boys wearing the same military uniform aimed their weapons at each other from about twenty meters away.

“You can’t, Heivia. If you kill him, we’ll lose any way to fight back against the Capitalist Corporations’ accusations!!”

“What the hell do you think we can clear up or stop now!? We’re past the stage where the fuse was lit. The spherical bomb with a skull and crossbones on it was has already blown up! And the friendly idiots who were supposed to stop it are all below the lava. This hell is going to cover the entire world before long. And yet the gigantic idiot that set the initial fire is still alive!!”

“Heivia!”

“He can’t fix anything, so we have no reason to risk our lives to protect him. We should just execute him already. Even if we did drag him back to the beachhead, some bizarre political decision would get in the way. …Do you really think the VIPs want this war to end? Just like the Capitalist Corporations wanted a reason to attack the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Legitimacy Kingdom has tons of reasons to have an excuse to attack them! It isn’t fear that’s burning through the world! It’s a fire of greed, so there’s no way to end it!!”

“Are you saying taking him back still wouldn’t stop this world war?”

“He won’t get a proper hearing. He’ll be found suspiciously hanged in his cell and it’ll be called a suicide, so why protect him? If it’s an issue of sooner or later, then we might as well kill him ourselves!!”

“Then…”

Quenser gave an anguished groan as he held enough firepower to blow his awful friend to smithereens.

“Then we can’t leave him with the Legitimacy Kingdom. We’ll have to leave him with the neutral Blue Cross and have the truth revealed in the international courts. It’s a long shot, but that’s the only way to stop the entire world from burning down!”

“All you’ve done is give me the justification I need, Quenser. Now I can shoot you to prevent you from deserting and leaking our information.”

“Heivia…”

“Stop. You can’t win this. Do you really think we’re on equal footing here? There’s no way I’ll lose to a student.”

“…”

“You get one warning. I’ve got an assault rifle, so even if I shoot an arm or leg, it’ll still tear open an artery. …Put down that War Hammer. I’ve said my part, Quenser. The rest is up to you.”

Still, the two boys remained entirely motionless for over ten seconds.

If either one of them moved their trigger finger five millimeters back, it would all fall apart.

But finally, something seemed to drive Quenser to remove his eye from the sight.

He slowly removed the stock from his shoulder and lowered the

muzzle of the gun. Then he let it dangle down from his hands.

“There, that’s a good boy. Now you-…”

Heivia never finished speaking.

Without even looking through the sight, Quenser pulled the trigger of the firearm dangling from his hands.

Something was fired onto the thoroughly heated ground at the exact midpoint between them. It was a translucent slime that covered twenty or thirty centimeters.

A piece of metal the size of a watch battery released a mechanical flash and a large explosion followed.

Both Quenser and Heivia were swept backwards by the blast.

A cloud of dust filled the sky to block their view of each other.

Those boys always seemed to be together, but now the distance between them seemed to stretch out forever.

Part 6

Quenser pulled on Nyarlathotep's hand as he ran through the boiling orange forest.

"Ah…ahh…"

As he did, he opened his mouth wide.

He could not stop screaming even though the scorching wind could roast his lungs at any moment.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!
Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

At a distance of less than a meter, he mercilessly pulled the trigger while aiming at the man's stomach.

With a muffled sound, Nyarlathotep's body flew through the air and crashed into a broken tree trunk.

He coughed and looked down at his stomach for a while.

Quenser kept the bullpup War Hammer at the ready and his finger on the detonation trigger.

"I don't want to get along with you either!!"

"…"

"But the world will end without you. So I'll use you! Listen, if I pull this wireless trigger, your body will be blown in half and your organs will scatter everywhere!! I can do that at any moment! So do as I say. I don't care what kind of justification you had. Whatever your reason, I'll make sure you take responsibility!!"

"That makes sense. Fine." Nyarlathotep smiled. "If I could redo my life a hundred times, I would still kill Azathoth every single time, but I don't want any lasting effects. Take me wherever you want. Take me someplace where I can take responsibility for what I did."

"First, we'll pay the Blue Cross a visit," replied Quenser. "Both the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Capitalist Corporations avoided attacking them. It can be the refugee camp, the tent hospital, or the food support center, but we need to get someplace with the same authority as a temporary embassy or consulate. Even Objects are banned by international law from firing their main cannons there. I can't think of any other way to survive against those monsters."

Part 7

Heivia groaned as he got up from the scorching ground.

He started tearing at his hair when he found Quenser and Nyarlathotep had vanished.

“Does that idiot really get what this means?”

Requests were still flowing in over the radio.

The intelligence division members had been wiped out.

The Princess on the Baby Magnum and Frolaytia commanding the battalion from the megafloat beachhead would both want to know of any survivors.

But what would they do when they learned about this?

What would they do when they found out Quenser Barbotage had taken Nyarlathotep with him as he left the Legitimacy Kingdom and tried to flee to a different group, even if that group was the Blue Cross.

“If I could have stopped him here, it all would have worked out once this was over.”

Heivia was a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier.

He had his reasons for taking part in this war, so he could not walk the same path as a battlefield student like Quenser.

He could not just throw it all away.

Still, he raised his voice while thinking about the boy who had watched his back all this time.

“The Capitalist Corporations aren’t your only enemy now! Don’t you get that the Baby Magnum is going to be after you too!?”

Two armies and two Objects would now be sent after a mere student.

Part 8

Quenser and Nyarlathotep no longer needed to hide from the Blue Cross civilians, so they approached one and asked where their base was located.

There, they learned the refugee camp and tent hospital were located even further south than the Baby Magnum stationed five kilometers south of here. It made sense when they thought about it. They could hardly let people sleep on the ground when it was ninety degrees Celsius, so they would need to place their base far away from the heat and lava.

But…

“But…I don’t see how we can possibly slip past the Baby Magnum.”

“Agreed. As a First Generation, it was made with enemies other than Objects in mind and has a lot of excess fat to show for it. A Second Generation would be one thing, but we can’t hope to survive a traditional anti-personnel battle here.”

As the two of them discussed the issue, the young volunteer in a fire-resistant suit said more.

“The Panama Canal is a giant entranceway that’s eighty kilometers long in all.”

“And?”

“There’s a water gate maintenance point at the forty kilometer point in the center. It should be protected by international law too. If you can make it there…”

They were near the eight kilometer point on the far western end of the canal, so they still needed to travel more than thirty kilometers through this scorching hell that would be deadly after an hour without a fire-resistant suit.

However, that faint hope was all they had.

As they thanked the young man, they advised that he leave the Panama Canal because the usual rules were not going to apply, but he only smiled and shook his head. But that was not because he did not see the danger.

“The canal gathers the most attention, but there was a lot of vegetation around here. It used to be a famous for its coffee and quite a few corporations came here to investigate rare insects in search of chemical compounds to use in drugs.”

“…”

“Back when the UN still existed, a destroyed Eastern European city was apparently reproduced down to every last crack in the bricks as a symbol of restoration. I’m not going to give up. This is our fight and it’s far more difficult than wielding guns or bombs. So I’m not going to give up the fight until this land is filled with water and vegetation and everyone’s smiles have returned.”

“I see. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“?”

The young man tilted his head at Nyarlathotep’s oddly affable voice.

The three of them turned to face their separate objectives without knowing which one of them was truly approaching almost certain death.

Quenser and Nyarlathotep walked along the scorching concrete bank of the glowing orange canal. Their side of the canal was a world of orange lava and the other side was a burning industrial region partially hidden by a tall, broken double fence. The scenery never seemed to change and simply viewing it seemed to wear away one’s stamina.

Even so, Quenser kept his feet moving.

This work slowly but surely wore down his life.

For some reason, Nyarlathotep did not seem to like walking in

silence, so he kept speaking as he walked alongside Quenser.

“I did quite a lot.”

“?”

“The most notable jobs were mostly ways of obstructing an enemy nation’s weapons development and manufacturing. I would infiltrate a fighter jet production line and inject some data that would mass produce defective products. Or I would lure them into making a cyber attack where I would let them steal the plans to a decoy reactor. The scientists in lab coats would construct the test reactor and happily blow themselves up on the other side of the planet. They didn’t even have time to feel any pain.”

“Did you really enjoy tricking people for a living that much?”

“It would be more accurate to say that was the only way I could face society. I didn’t become an expert in faking my own death because I wanted to. I screwed up so many times that I had no other way to get by.”

Nyarlathotep was an expert spy.

He may have wanted to keep the conversation going so he could keep the mental initiative.

But he may not have had any real goal in mind. It may have been more of a habit, like a squirrel hiding nuts.

“I often worked with Acre Kiss-of-Rose…that is, Azathoth who created an ID with that name.”

“What’s with those Nyar and Aza names? I don’t get it.”

“They’re nothing more than common pseudonyms. You need to learn more about recreation, boy. He was originally a Capitalist Corporations’ spy just like me. Other people often don’t accept the things we do for our jobs and it can be difficult getting on everyone’s good side or finding a weakness to exploit, so Azathoth decided it would be faster to send someone to the higher ups and have a ‘system’ created that made it easier for us.”

“Just to be clear, he was the CEO of a 7th Core corporation, right?”

“That just shows how well he did for himself. Although it is true he knew how to use the carrot and the stick to control people’s hearts like a true spy.”

Nyarlathotep stared down the seemingly never-ending path as he continued speaking.

“But once he could command his own Object, a gear seemed to come loose. A change in the earth’s crust transformed the equal round table into a distorted pyramid. From there, it became nothing but a series of uninteresting jobs.”

“And that’s why you took out Acre…I mean, Azathoth?”

“That’s skipping a fair bit.” The man with the neatly parted hair smiled a little. “After my heart was worn down quite a lot, I joined with some others who felt the same and we used my usual method.”

“Faking your death?”

“Even as skilled as I am at it, it wasn’t easy against that CEO of a major corporation.”

While it “wasn’t easy”, he had managed to pull it off.

That summed up the man’s talent and skill.

“Anyway, after erasing all traces of ourselves, we parted ways. I chose my new home in a carefree land near the equator that had plenty of water and a certain level of medical facilities. …In other words, I chose the Soberania District.”

“Oh, so was the Soberania Disturbance started because Azathoth was pursuing you?”

“I’m not so sure about that. Personally, I don’t think he knew.” The man rejected the idea. “He was trying to start a new online shopping service known as the Silver Key. It was set to bring in a massive fortune, but that meant it needed a massive amount of jet fuel. That in turn meant he needed a system to safely transport all

that fuel by tanker, so he tried to take the Panama Canal while claiming to be wiping out special commandos that would infiltrate large cities and cause largescale damage with detergent, fuel, and other everyday items. That was probably his entire purpose here. Reality isn't always driven by conspiracies or long, drawn-out plans. If it was, I could have cut him off more quickly."

Still, he had killed him.

It did not matter if the man had done it intentionally.

Nyarlathotep raised a finger as spoke.

"There were two tragedies for him. The first was not realizing that I, Nyarlathotep, was here."

He raised a second finger.

"The second was the fact that the self-suggestion I used to seal away my spy skills was broken by the deaths of my wife and son. …If something had been a little different somewhere along the line, I would not have been given that chance to kill him."

"…"

Inside that half-destroyed house, he had claimed he might have walked a different path had a single person in this world been on his side.

This may have been what he had meant.

What if someone had told him ahead of time and he had been given a chance to escape?

What if a hero had appeared and saved his family before his eyes?

What if, when he decided to walk the path of murder, a small hand had remained to grab at the sleeve of his uniform?

Quenser had no reason to support this man.

He understood that, but he still muttered a few words.

“…That is a tragedy.”

“Ha ha. What, are you going to believe the words of someone who worked as a spy for over two decades?”

“I believe you.”

Nyarlathotep’s expression did not change at the blunt admission.

He may have felt a reason to use his ability to fully block any emotion from showing on his face.

“You deceived a lot of people for your work and for your revenge. …But I don’t see any reason why you would lie about the story you’re leaving behind in the end.”

“That’s true.”

“Even if you’re captured by the Legitimacy Kingdom or sent to the international courts via the Blue Cross, you have no future. You’re a living corpse. You have no idea if you’ll ever come across someone else who won’t twist your words to help their organization or for appearances, so you’ll take this chance to leave behind what it is you hold inside.”

As they spoke, Nyarlathotep suddenly grabbed Quenser’s shoulder and tugged him behind a forklift for some kind of maintenance that was so scorched that its paint looked like a blackened banana.

They were hiding, but from what?

The answer was only three hundred meters ahead.

“It’s the Legitimacy Kingdom,” whispered Nyarlathotep.

“Dammit!”

Quenser just about clicked his tongue on reflex, but he quickly slammed on the brakes. Fortunately, the soldiers had yet to notice them. Even so, the War Hammer felt extremely heavy hanging from its sling belt.

“Why are they blocking our way? Did they predict where we would go?”

“It wouldn’t have been hard since you mentioned the Blue Cross before running off. The safest plan would have been to kill that boy instead of just creating a smokescreen.”

Quenser did not have it in him to respond to that.

They were still more than twenty kilometers from the Blue Cross water gate maintenance camp. Even if they slipped past these soldiers, more Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers could easily be patrolling along the rest of the way.

Would they continue on or make a change of plans?

The extreme situation sent sweat pouring down Quenser’s face, but something even more ominous approached.

It was a long, deep wing-like sound much like the propellers in an old war movie.

When the student looked up from behind the forklift, his expression crumbled.

The drones that acted as the Miskatonic’s anti-personnel eyes in the sky were slowly passing through the dark red sky.

“I can’t believe this…”

He spat out the words and stood up from behind the forklift.

It was hard to tell thanks to the hooded cloaks meant to protect against the heat and the sensors, but a close look revealed the soldiers blocking the way (and being observed from the sky) were all boys and girls even younger than Quenser himself.

“Dammit, and that Second Generation’s locked onto them! If I don’t do something soon, a deadly downpour is gonna fall right on top of them!”

“Can you really save them? They might put a bullet between your

eyes the second you show your face."

"Sorry, but while I might be working against them, I'm not their enemy!!"

Loud gunfire rang out as the panicking soldiers started firing their assault rifles into the sky, but Quenser doubted that would help. It would only call in more drones.

Quenser opened a container the size of a vaulting box that sat next to the forklift. There were thick pipes and safety valves inside, but that was not what he was interested in.

Some thick paper was crumpled up inside as cushioning.

"They may be using reciprocating engines, but they can still move at three or four hundred kph," whispered Nyarlathotep. "I doubt you can shoot them down with a bomb launcher."

"Who said that's what I'm doing? Hey, you help too!!"

"Why should I?"

He looked confused, so Quenser clicked his tongue and spoke.

He did not have time for this.

"Was your kid who died a boy or a girl?"

"As I said, he was my son. What about it?"

"Then if he were alive, how old would he be?"

"Isn't that a bit of a cheap shot?"

"How different was he from those kids who are about to be killed over there? Answer me."

"…"

"And this time you can save them. You can make it in time. So think carefully about this."

It was now Nyarlathotep's turn to click his tongue.

They may not have looked anything like him. There may not have been anything in common between the dead boy in his memories and the living people before him. Not their build, not their personality, and not their age.

But the associations made by the human mind were powerful.

Once a connection was made, it was impossible to escape it.

"Fine then… What should I start with?"

"Do you have anything I can tie with? It can be a string, a wire, or whatever else. I need to tie together this paper!"

"And?"

"I'm making a weapon that had its first major debut in the Swedish army's river crossing operation back in 1701!!"

"I see. That does seem like it would be effective."

Quenser worked with Nyarlathotep to tie up the thick paper, stuck a War Hammer fuse inside, and threw each of them into the orange canal one after another.

The loud splashing seemed to have clued the Legitimacy Kingdom boys and girls into their presence, but they could not back off now. Quenser pulled the detonation trigger to set off the fuse inside the paper. With an impact greater than a firecracker, the damp paper burst into flames.

The man with the neatly parted hair faithfully raised both hands but spoke with a thin smile on his face.

"The originals were clumps of straw, so I wonder if these will actually work."

"It doesn't matter if they don't burn perfectly. We already proved this would work back at the Miraflores Water Gate!"

A moment later, black smoke started rising from the paper floating on the water. Just like an octopus or squid would muddy the seawater with ink if they sensed danger, a portion of the scenery was quickly filled with the color black. The heated wind immediately swept the smoke over their heads.

Quenser raised his hands as well and shouted to the soldiers that he still believed where his allies.

“Don’t fire! You’ll tell them where you are! The heat and smoke will blind their eyes in the sky. All you need is an impromptu smokescreen weapon! If you don’t cause a commotion, the Miska-… the Extra Arc’s anti-personnel cannons can’t target you!!”

A dull metallic sound rang out.

Despite the countless guns aimed his way, Quenser turned just his head toward the sound.

At one or two kilometers away, it was closer than he had expected.

It was the Extra Arc…no, the Miskatonic.

(What happened back at the Miraflores Water Gate? After the drones lost sight of us, what did that monster do once we ran into the forest?)

With a great roar on the opposite bank, the area around the Miskatonic was surrounded in scarlet flames. Its own industrial region crumbled even further. It may have been scattering chemical incendiary rounds at the same time. Not only did the entire area burn indiscriminately, but it seemed to cover even its own surface in a deep red hood.

The eight flower petals on the back of the spherical main body began to wriggle. The main cannons squirmed through the air like the tentacles of a mollusk capturing its prey and they slowly turned toward Quenser and the others.

Those plasma cannons had abnormal power. They contained a disastrous fire that could instantly transform the entire scenery into orange lava.

Heivia must have contacted the others to inform them of that firepower because the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers started retreating. They were slowly backing away from the canal as if to put as much distance between them and the Object as they could.

But Quenser shouted out as if to tap them on the back.

“No, jump in!!”

As if to demonstrate, Quenser ran full speed toward the Panama Canal, and thus toward the Capitalist Corporations-controlled Azuero District and the Miskatonic itself. Nyarlathotep followed after him with a thin smile on his face.

The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers aimed their assault rifles at the two, but not a single bullet flew their way.

After a moment of hesitation, several sets of footsteps ran after them.

They all jumped into the water that reflected the orange light. They did not at all feel like they were inside the ocean. It was worse than a hot bath. It was possible all of the fish had long since died.

But they could hardly complain.

They immense quantity of water and the current saved them. The water had an average temperature between sixty and eighty degrees and it would occasionally reach as high as ninety. If the liquid were not being churned up by the current, it might have been the same as boiling water.

Quenser poked just his head from the water and glared at the Miskatonic.

He waited in silence.

And waited in silence.

And waited in silence.

Finally, the Miskatonic’s giant form moved. It slowly backed away

and accelerated northward.

“It doesn’t want to get the Panama Canal’s water gates and pumps involved. Looks like those rules are still in effect.”

“That’s no real reason to relax.”

Quenser spat back at Nyarlathotep’s comment.

He then shouted at the boys and girls wearing the same uniform he was.

“Do you know why it withdrew? To come up with a countermeasure! Next time, it won’t be using drones. They might have to throw something together at the last second, but they’ll attach some anti-personnel sensors directly to that thing and resume the hunt. Once that happens, a smokescreen will be useless and we’ll be blown away as soon as it locks onto us. You need to get out of here before that happens! Hurry!!”

“Ah…Huh?”

Nyarlathotep ignored the confused boy and asked a question.

“You can worry about others if you like, but what about us? I think we’ll be targeted first and foremost.”

“Change of plans,” groaned Quenser. “We’re going to swim across to the Azuero District to the north. We’ll slip into their maintenance base and stop them from using what little knowledge they have to find a way to get the anti-personnel sensors they need. …I said I excel at that kind of thing, didn’t I?”

“Didn’t you say you had to be prepared to die about three times along the way?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m sick of babysitting some kids that I’m not sure have even grown any hair down there yet. Let’s destroy the source of the danger so we can safely reach the goal line.”

With that decided, Quenser and Nyarlathotep began swimming across the fifty meter wide canal.

There were armed soldiers behind them, but no one fired at them.

The soldiers may have realized that pulling the trigger could lead to something unpleasant dropping down on their heads.

Part 9

An unpleasant tension stung at Quenser's skin.

It had begun the moment he had crossed the canal and entered the Capitalist Corporations' Azuero District. It may have come from his awareness that he was standing in enemy territory.

A double chain-link fence nearly three meters tall blocked the way, but it was not much of an obstacle with so much of it broken and collapsed. There were also guard towers with gun turrets, but they had fallen over.

The entire scenery changed.

The Soberania District had resembled a resort town or forest after a fire, but the Azuero District was covered in asphalt and filled with giant concrete boxes and cylindrical metal tanks. It all looked like an unhealthy industrial sector.

However, the entire place had transformed into a scorching red and black hell with the buildings melted into lava.

Here and there, Quenser saw groups of metal pipes that almost seemed to form a brain. They even passed by overhead like overpasses, so he opened his mouth.

"This is right on the border, so what kind of factory was this?"

"It's too scorched to read properly, but you can just barely make out 'Liquid-N' on the tanks."

"Liquid nitrogen?"

"It's probably officially meant for humanitarian medicine, but I bet it was actually being used in research and development for a new type of night assault cannon."

"Those weapons are meant to silently attack a maintenance base zone and then leave, right?"

“Mortars and multiple rocket launchers are the standard weapons for attacking a base, but they don’t have much initial speed and it takes a few seconds before they hit. If people react to the sound of them being fired and jump out of the way or get down on the ground, the number of casualties goes way down, so everyone wants a way to launch a shell without using any powder.”

“I know our intelligence division was doing some research by launching a baseball with compressed air…but I think that was a failure because it didn’t give the ball much distance for how heavy the unit was.”

“Here, they were probably trying to gain even more power by flash vaporizing liquid nitrogen inside the barrel. It might sound difficult to use, but liquid nitrogen can be safely stored in a thermos.”

“It still doesn’t seem to fit with the ‘firepower above all else’ ideal of the Object worshippers.”

“If the research was actually important, they would never build the factory next to the border, even if it is a border with a blank region. It’s probably a dumping ground for anyone who messes up in defending their home country.”

The industrial sector burned loudly as Quenser and Nyarlathotep walked through it.

The sky was covered by black smoke as far as the eye could see, but it was not coming from the smokestacks. They could not hear a single sound indicating the facilities here were running.

Similarly, no one else seemed to be around.

“Those main cannons we saw back at the Miraflores Water Gate were insanely powerful.”

The facilities were packed in tightly despite how much space there was, so they had poor visibility. Quenser glanced around, but he could not see the giant Object from here.

“Those weren’t normal low-stability plasma cannons. How do they get that much power? Are they compressing a huge amount of

catalyst, are they sending in a powerful electric current, or does it have something like a circular particle accelerator inside?"

"It's probably simpler than that. That's plasma, but it leaves the category of the low-stability plasma cannon. That's why it can use an unprecedented level of power."

"…?"

Quenser initially did not seem to know what the man meant, but…

"Wait, you're kidding, right? Is that even possible?"

"All of the energy swirling through the JPlevelMHD reactor is directly retrieved and launched from the tubes. …So that's plasma that can't be called 'low-stability'. It's the overwhelming heat that keeps a two hundred thousand ton giant fighting at speeds in excess of five hundred kph. Do you see now why that would have the destructive power to carve orange paths into the planet?"

"Do you have any proof that's what it's doing?"

"No. But I can't think of any other theory to explain what I saw."

Quenser was not about to take the words of an enemy spy at face value, but he placed it in a corner of his mind as a possibility.

But if that theory was true…

(The explosion of a test reactor has enough power to stop an Object. If all that energy is being directly sent out, even the Princess would be vaporized in a single hit. And it can keep firing it from eight different cannons?)

Those were some frightening specs, but he still had his doubts.

If that was true, they would need a way past a certain problem present in the design of an Object.

Nyarlathotep pointed forward.

"If you have any doubts, check it out for yourself. That's the best

course of action in an environment filled with both truth and lies."

After walking around the corner of a giant crumbling factory, Quenser frantically backed up.

The Miskatonic was hidden there.

That nightmarish Object used its eight tentacles to freely fire the energy drawn directly from its reactor.

"Why!? Shouldn't there at least be guards around it if it's undergoing maintenance!?"

"Even with heat-resistant suits, they can't keep soldiers around at all times when it's ninety degrees here. But if they send the Object back to a safer area, the Legitimacy Kingdom will use that as an opportunity to advance. Instead, they send only the bare minimum of equipment into this scorching region to keep the soldiers out of this sauna as much as possible. …After all, an Object can't be damaged by a surprise attack from rank and file soldiers. Or so they believe."

Based on their experience so far, the Miskatonic most likely used the drones for everything but anti-Object targeting. Currently, it was busy having anti-personnel sensors installed because it could not trust its eyes in the sky. It was unlikely it would send out the drones it no longer trusted.

With that in mind, Quenser and Nyarlathotep moved out from the factory wall again. They stayed low and jogged over to the Object.

It used an air cushion propulsion device. The air cushion was shaped like a diagonal "#" with the front two lines stretched out. Overall, it had the silhouette of a double-edged sword. The edges suck out from the Object a little bit and they looked like an aircraft carrier's flight deck.

"Wow… The entire road is covered in a forest of steel beams. How many of them are there? And the Object is sitting on top of that metal forest."

"It's a way of distributing the weight. They do the same thing in

shipbuilding. When a seventy thousand ton cruiser is being constructed, it's supported by countless wooden beams before it's allowed to float in the water."

Countless thick wires extended from the surrounding factories and cylindrical tanks and they connected to the Object like it was Gulliver. Maintenance soldiers in fire-resistant suits were traveling up and down those wires. Most of the work was being done overhead, so Quenser and Nyarlathotep rushed into the forest of steel beams so as not to be seen. They were directly below the two hundred thousand ton Miskatonic.

Quenser groaned as he nervously looked overhead.

"That float looks like a sword. It extends so far forward. Wouldn't half…no, a third as much be able to support it?"

"That's just how incredibly powerful its main cannons are. It needs this giant float for the recoil."

They continued to the very back of the metal forest and poked their heads out from below the Object ceiling.

There, they saw the eight flower petals attached to the back of the spherical main body. The eight tentacles attached to those giant reels were far too close.

"They're basically endoscopes. Do you think they use electromagnets to control the plasma?"

"I don't see what else they could use. They basically have a small sun trapped in there, so even if they make the walls thicker, the plasma's heat will still melt the material."

They did not know if it was the tokamak method or the torus method, but the inside of those tubes had to be filled with extremely high power electromagnets. That immense magnetic line would restrain the plasma and fire it by letting it "escape" in the desired direction.

Quenser pulled his head back to hide below the Object ceiling again.

“I have one question about its targeting.”

“And that is?”

“Our theory was that the Miskatonic uses its own sensors to target Objects and the drones for soldiers and anything else.”

Quenser leaned against one of the steel beams.

“But how? Its main cannons are overwhelming. I’d heard the Legitimacy Kingdom’s observation equipment was blinded in the instant it fired because the values grew too high. In that case, how is it targeting the enemy Object from the center of that vortex of plasma?”

“Now that you mention it, that is strange.”

“It obviously can’t use optical or IR sensors. And all the noise rules out auditory or ultrasonic.”

“That much plasma would also render electromagnetic waves unusable. It couldn’t be using radar.”

Quenser followed up Nyarlathotep’s comment by thinking through a human’s senses.

“What about smell or taste?”

“Do you know how chemical weapons like poison gas are disposed of? Most of the time, they’re incinerated in the high temperature of aluminum of napalm. The particles behind smell can’t be relied on in that plasma.”

“But the particles aren’t wiped out entirely. That would break the conservation of mass. They’ve only been made harmless and invisible, but they’re still floating around, right? The extreme heat simply changes their chemical structure into something else.”

“So you’re suggesting an olfactory sensor that assumes the indicator has been oxidized? In other words, it has a particle collection device? We should have paid attention to the direction of the wind.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s about to fire. It must use something scattered by the target…like a static electricity model’s repellant or an air cushion model’s turbine lubricant. It uses that ‘smell’ to maintain an accurate targeting lock in the middle of this hell of heat and light.”

In exchange, the Object’s own sensors had not been able to accurately target Quenser and the others when they fled into the forest near the Miraflores Water Gate. Humans did not scatter that much material when they breathed.

That was why it had been forced to attack the general area and create those rivers of lava.

It had only been able to assume it had killed them.

Nyarlathotep accepted the idea before saying more.

“But how does that help us? All that lets us do is divert its aim with chaff or a flare when it targets another Object.”

“Not necessarily. We can abuse that method to get it to fire its main cannons wherever we want. And the Miskatonic uses massive plasma cannons. It’s possible we could…”

“Get the enemy to fire on its own forces?”

“…”

Quenser fell silent for a while and finally responded.

“No, let’s wait until later to get greedy. Right now, we just need to take out its anti-personnel sensors. We need to figure out what they’re attaching to it.”

“What a pain. Are we going to walk up one of those wires? That would definitely be hard to do without being spotted. It would be easier if we could get our hands on those fire-resistant suits they’re wearing.”

“All that matters is that we know they aren’t done working yet.”

Quenser grabbed his War Hammer with both hands.

“If I fire at the tip and base of their crane game, I can interrupt their work.”

“I’m all for blowing something up, but wait until after we have an escape route. That has a wireless trigger for remote detonation, right?”

Just as they started discussing their plans, a high-pitched whistle sounded overhead.

It was the same explosive roar as the jet engine hanging down from a large passenger plane’s wing. Quenser looked up without thinking and was amazed to find his body still had enough moisture to sweat.

“Oh, no. The air cushion is starting up! We need to get out of here! We’ll be crushed by the compressed air!!”

They did not have time to worry about the danger of being spotted by the Capitalist Corporations maintenance soldiers. The two of them ran through the forest of steel beams and out from below the roof formed by the Miskatonic.

A moment later, a tremendous wall of air blew through.

Just as the two hundred thousand ton mass began to float, the excess air scattered in every direction. Their bodies seemed to grow weightless and their toes left the scorching asphalt. Quenser swallowed a scream and focused exclusively on not biting his tongue as he was forced to enjoy an aerial swim at more than five meters up.

He lost his balance, crashed into the road again, and rolled another twenty meters.

“Ah…gah! Gh!? Bghah!!”

Occasionally the news would get worked up over a story of a truck dragging someone behind it, but this may have been similar. If not for the thick helmet meant to fight the flames and sensors, his head

might have looked like it had been grated.

Similarly, Nyarlathotep was saved by his firefighter's outfit and he slowly rose to his unsteady feet. Quenser's mouth was still flapping wordlessly, so the man grabbed his arm and forced him to his feet as well.

There was a good reason for doing that.

A sudden flash of light sliced through the industrial sector.

There was a thick orange afterimage through the air and a white flash of light as if from welding at the point of contact.

The giant concrete factory was roasted through. The Miskatonic snapped its many wires and jumped to the right to escape. The maintenance soldiers working up top were vaporized, set on fire, or sent into a freefall.

Yes, the Miskatonic dodged.

The attack had come from somewhere else.

In other words…

"A laser beam!? Was that the Princess!?"

"So they've crossed a line too. I never thought the Legitimacy Kingdom would be the first one to enter the demilitarized zone."

Part 10

Removing rubble would leave one a sweaty mess at the best of times and doing it in an 80+ degree sauna did not help. The word “heatstroke” seriously entered Heivia’s mind as a weapon.

While he focused on his surroundings, a rumbling passed him by. A metal bucket on the front of a military tractor was shoving the rubble (and the asphalt below it) away like a snowplow.

Heivia and the rest of an infantry unit followed to make sure there was nothing remaining on the road and finally called in a report over the radio.

“The road has been levelled. I repeat, the road has been levelled! If you blow a tire here, you’re either incredibly unlucky or the maintenance soldiers haven’t been doing their job. Let’s get this over with and leave the rest to the Princess!!”

A response came in the form of an even greater mass of noise approaching from up ahead.

Or rather, it was a tremor running through the ground.

A vehicle two or three times the size of trucks seen on normal roads traveled down the path they had cleared. Lengthwise, it was on the same level as the Princess’s Baby Magnum.

The giant vehicle had thirty-two wheels and it was on the way to the Panama Canal that divided the Soberania District and the Azuero District.

The entire chassis was lifted up by fixed legs like with a crane and the creaking of hydraulic cylinders rang out.

The already giant vehicle extended even further like an accordion. It was enough to slowly cross the entire Panama Canal that was made for tankers to pass through.

“This is incredible. We can build a bridge to reach the battlefield in

only ten minutes."

Heivia commented out of habit but cleared his throat when he remembered his usual companion was not with him.

Meanwhile, the large bridge vehicle extended its body that was folded up like an accordion. The mountains and valleys flattened out as it extended further and further.

It soon reached the other bank and something like a stake was driven in.

"Can I go now?" asked the Princess.

"Not yet. If we don't attach floats at even intervals down the bridge, it'll snap down the middle. It's just like a girl's ass: being too big can be a problem too."

The Princess did not respond to his joke.

The awkward silence of an elevator ride with a stranger followed, but she used the downtime to say something else.

"Did Quenser not know this would happen?"

"How should I know? What matters is that he made an enemy of the Legitimacy Kingdom. And to protect the guy that caused all of this. He's got a boner for the fact that he holds the fate of mankind and the trigger to war in his hands."

"…Sigh."

The Princess only had secondhand information, so she did not know the exact situation in which Quenser and Heivia had aimed their weapons at each other.

She only knew that she had been ordered to resolve this situation even if it meant killing Quenser.

"But no matter how hard he tries, he can't defeat the Baby Magnum."

She was not simply overestimating her ability. She had seen Quenser and Heivia blow away cutting-edge Second Generations on several occasions, but she could still confidently state that fact.

Her Baby Magnum was an “outdated” First Generation. That meant it was constructed to overwhelm any weapon, including nuclear missiles, instead of just fighting other Objects. Simply put, it contained far more anti-personnel sensors and weapons than those other Objects.

Defeating a Second Generation was no proof that he could defeat a First Generation.

“And apparently he’s doing it all to protect some old guy,” she complained. “Does it not even have to be a girl anymore?”

“What are you talking about? From what I’ve heard, he charged right into danger to protect our novice unit from that Object. It scares me how far that suicidal pervert has expanded the range of who he’ll protect.”

Part 11

“The Baby Magnum has crossed the demilitarized Panama Canal using the bridge vehicle. The invasion of the Capitalist Corporations’ Azuero District has begun. As planned, contact with the Extra Arc has been confirmed.”

A young female operator read off the report in the operation control room of the giant square megafloat beachhead near the Panama Bay.

The dimly-lit room was kept a little too cool and the operator glanced just once over at Frolaytia.

“Are you sure we should have done this?”

“The situation is urgent enough to warrant it.”

An orange glow came from the end of her long, narrow kiseru as the busty silver-haired commander gave her annoyed reply.

She was currently using the laptop sitting next to her to speak with an old man relaxing in a distant safe country.

“Do you think you can manage this?” he asked. “I have my hands full dealing with the hard-liners who can barely contain their smiles as they shout shrilly at me. They want you to attack the enemy’s valuable weapons manufacturing facilities and resource mines as a preemptive strike to protect the valuable lives of our own people. … And would you look at that? All of the marks they’ve put on the map are cities with populations of at least a million. Makes you wonder if they even know how to read a map.”

“If we do capture Nyarlathotep, is there a chance he’ll be silenced before he can be transported to a safe country for a military trial?”

“Of course. And even if he does give his testimony, they’ll buy as much time as they can by claiming his confession was forced through torture. Those damn berserkers have forgotten the terror of

war after living in peace for so long. It's those kinds of idiots who end up with foolish-looking pictures in the history books."

"If we don't come up with a countermeasure, the entire globe will be sent back to the stone age."

"The Faith Organization might be crying tears of joy since some of them think it's about time humanity was destroyed for a global reset, but we disagree. You're on the beachhead instead of in your usual maintenance base, right? Do you know why that change was made?"

"You can't mean…"

"Open the container marked top secret in the corner of the third bunker. On top of that giant float is everything you need to hold a military trial. It doesn't have to last more than a minute or even half a minute. As soon as Nyarlathotep gets there, begin and end that trial. That will leave the conclusion that this series of events was all his doing and the Legitimacy Kingdom had no part in it. … As long as we have that judgment paper, we can avoid giving the solar system a second star."

"In other words, you aren't giving any thought to what happens to Nyarlathotep afterwards?"

"If the defendant kicks the bucket, there's no risk of an appeal. We won't have to worry about war breaking out during a years-long process or some skilled attorney overturning everything. This is actually the best option for anyone who wants world peace. When the hard-liners' assassin shows up, make sure to pay them a tip."

The smiling old man ended the transmission.

Frolaytia breathed out some sweet smoke and spoke with a bitter look on her face.

"I'm beginning to think it really is time humanity was destroyed for a global reset."

Part 12

Quenser was covered in scrapes, but he could not complain.

His goal had been the destruction of the anti-personnel sensors set to be added to the Miskatonic. That had been meant to reduce the sacrifices among the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers, but the situation had changed.

The two Objects were fighting now.

Led by Nyarlathotep, Quenser ran from the Miskatonic. The Object moved every which way as it dodged the main cannon shots fired by the Baby Magnum. The orange ruins were destroyed even further like some kind of natural disaster.

Nyarlathotep spoke as he ran.

“Let’s find some masks somewhere. There must be some in these specialized factories.”

“Masks?”

“Those tanks are filled with liquid nitrogen, right? If they burst and the contents get out, it will vaporize almost immediately. That is not an environment for a human being that inhales oxygen and exhales carbon dioxide.”

“This place is going to get even closer to being like the surface of Mars!?”

Quenser shouted in fear as he held his War Hammer in both hands.

Not far away, the Miskatonic began returning fire. It scattered chemical incendiary rounds while its eight tentacle-like main cannons began to wriggle. Pure white beams were released from various angles.

The industrial sector had just barely maintained its scorched form as it was dyed orange, but it quickly melted into the lava now.

It had been enough of a shock to knock him unconscious when he first saw it, but was growing accustomed to this a good thing? Quenser swore in his heart to see an eye doctor once this was over.

The two of them were assaulted by scorching waves of heat and a tremendous shaking below their feet.

Walls collapsed and Object maintenance materials fell from large trucks. A metal sphere several meters across even rolled across an intersection in the work roads.

“Wah!?”

Quenser was nearly crushed, but his surprise did not come from the near miss.

The item was far different from a giant wrecking ball.

“A test reactor!? They carried in one of those as a spare part!?”

“Do you think we could make it go supercritical to blow away the Miskatonic from below?”

“It wouldn’t be that easy. Even if we did try to get close, those randomly fired chemical incendiary rounds are too scary. Let’s just keep going!”

However, a giant wall blocked their way. It was actually a tube over two meters wide wriggling around the area. It was probably a spare part for the Miskatonic’s main cannons.

Quenser clicked his tongue and searched for a way around it.

The clash between the two monsters was underway not far away.

“She’s at a disadvantage,” said Nyarlathotep in reference to the Princess. “Part of it comes down to the power of her main cannons, but the lava also stops her static electricity propulsion. Plus, her sensors are blinded. And if our theory is correct, the Miskatonic can accurately aim using its high-level olfactory sensors. She has no chance in a head-on battle.”

“Fortunately, the Miskatonic’s new anti-personnel sensors weren’t added in yet. The Princess is one thing, but we don’t have to worry about it locating us.”

“The fact that you chose to charge in to fight after hearing my explanation tells me they should build a statue to honor you. I sympathize with that partner who must always be following you around like this.”

Quenser adjusted his grip on the War Hammer and changed direction with Nyarlathotep. They gave the Miskatonic a wide berth as they ran through a factory.

“Don’t forget that the Legitimacy Kingdom is firing on us too, boy. Look, there are foot soldiers deployed in addition to the Object. How are we going to get past them?”

“I know that. Besides, the First Generation Baby Magnum’s sensors are enough of a-…”

He trailed off as he heard something explode behind them. He quickly looked back and saw a burst pipe partway down the way they had come.

(Did the heat raise the internal pressure too far!?)

But that was not the only explosion. More and more sounded out and they were getting closer.

“We’re going to be swallowed up.”

“But if we run out from here…!!”

There was another large building across a large work road. If they made it there, they would find new, safer cover.

But the second Quenser poked his head out, orange sparks flew from the nearby wall.

He ducked down and pulled his head back.

He poked just his survival kit’s knife out to check again and could

tell someone was wielding an assault rifle seven hundred meters ahead.

Quenser clenched his teeth and shouted the familiar boy's name.

"Heivia!!"

"So we're cornered. He seems to be using a silencer, but I don't see why he would need to avoid telling his comrades where his enemy is."

"That doesn't matter."

The explosions were approaching from behind.

"Without a rifle that has support sensors, they'll have to get closer to shoot. We can make a run for it now. If we can find a way past that idiot, that is."

"But he's proven his skill. Step out there and you'll have your spine shot out before you make it ten steps."

"I have an idea."

"Just tell me what it is."

"If he can shoot at us, that means the line of sight between us is clear."

"But we have no gun. A handgun and your precious War Hammer can't fire seven hundred meters.

"That isn't all I have on hand."

As he spoke, Quenser reached for his bullpup sticky bomb launcher.

With a solid clicking sound, he removed a piece of it.

In the fiery hell of nearly one hundred degrees, Heivia Winchell could not lie down on the asphalt to steady himself.

Instead, he stood upright as held his assault rifle and secretly clicked his tongue.

(Dammit. I would've hit on the first shot if I could do this by the book.)

The young soldier next to him spoke from below a silver cloak.

"What is it, Heivia? Quit firing needlessly. Just because this is an abandoned Capitalist Corporations factory doesn't mean you can blow up all the fuel tanks like this is a video game. Wars have rules, you know?"

"You idiot, that's not the point!!"

Just as he removed his eye from the scope to shout back, a transmission reached his radio.

The frequency and encryption format had long since been changed, but he still had Quenser's bandwidth set in case he could "intercept" something. The reason for that went without saying: intelligence itself was a weapon for the military.

"…Quenser?"

"Yeah, yeah. You've got that right. I never knew you were so heartless."

"What are you talking about? You're the one that blew me away with a bomb! Besides, you still owe me two hundred euros! And when we went to peep on the women's bath the other day, you ran off and abandoned me!!"

"I have a suggestion, Heivia. …By the way, what do you think happened to the photo I took back then?"

"Hm? …Photo?"

Heivia's expression grew incredibly serious.

At the same time, a small piece of paper slowly stuck out from behind a distant wall.

It was a picture of Frolaytia Capistrano in the bath.

"Let's make a deal, Heivia. This will be our little secret."

"Tch!!!!"

Reason and instinct began an all-out battle inside Heivia Winchell.

Killing Quenser would be easy, but if he let go of that photo, the wind would blow it right into that sea of flames. The only way for Heivia to get his hands on this was to accept Quenser's terms.

Blood focused in the soldier's head until he thought he would get a nosebleed, but he finally reached his conclusion.

(Okay, I'll burn it into my memory and then kill him.)

A hopeless guy was only going to reach a hopeless conclusion.

He began staring through his sniper scope so intently he thought the capillaries in his eyes were going to burst.

(This isn't good. I know it's only a photo, but it still looks like red light is shining from her eyes. She's trained me pretty well, hasn't she?)

But the idiot soon rejected that idea.

"No, wait…"

He blinked.

That alluring bathing scene photograph had a tiny, tiny pinprick of a hole in it. It was right on Frolaytia's eye.

And something was aimed Heivia's way from behind the photograph and thus hidden from his sight.

"A laser sight!? What are you, a rude spectator!?"

With the photo in his right hand and the War Hammer's sensor in his left, Quenser's hands were full.

So it was Nyarlathotep who used the boy's survival kit knife as a mirror to observe the situation.

"The sniper looked away. He probably doesn't want to be blinded."

“Now’s our chance. Let’s go!!”

Quenser and Nyarlathotep both charged out from behind cover.

At the same time, the exploding pipes swallowed up the spot they had been hiding in.

The surrounding soldiers began spraying bullets their way, but reaching them and hitting them were two different things. Without a mid-range sniper unit, an assault rifle’s average range was between three and four hundred meters. That was not enough.

They ran across the wide work road and behind the cover provided by the wall of the next building.

“That settles it. They know we’re here now. They’re going to start a human wave attack soon.”

“Either way, we can’t escape from the anti-personnel sensors of the Princess’s First Generation. Plus, the more of their people are here, the more options we have.”

Quenser reattached the laser sight to the War Hammer and poked his head out once more.

A few guns immediately aimed his way, but he fired his War Hammer before they could do anything.

A few of the lenses attached to the Baby Magnum’s smaller cannons whirred as it fought the Miskatonic.

Rather than hitting a person, the jelly-like bomb had hit a giant cylindrical tank filled with liquid nitrogen.

Quenser ignored the assault rifles as he brought his radio to his mouth.

“Let’s talk this out peacefully, Princess! Call off the soldiers. If that tank bursts here, the heat of the lava will immediately create a cloud of nitrogen and that will kill everyone here like it’s a gas chamber.”

“Do you want me to kill you?”

“I’ll admit I look like a caged bird about to be killed by the fat cat, but are you sure you want to shoot me? Even the smallest of an Object’s cannons will cause too much destruction. Ha ha ha! If only you had a way to kill me without destroying the tank.”

That was when he heard a muffled explosion and a wave of heat washed over the surface of the earth with enough force to feel like a physical wall.

The Miskatonic was scattering its chemical incendiary rounds while moving at high speed.

Quenser covered his mouth with a hand and crouched down to weather the storm.

He had to peel his dried lips apart to shout into the radio.

“Just have them fall back, you idiot!! It’s too late by the time all your adorable little comrades are holding their throats and writhing in pain!!”

“…”

There was a short pause and confused looks covered the faces of all the soldiers aiming their rifles his away.

They all glared at him while moving back without turning around.

Heivia did the same, but he accurately aimed at the center of Quenser’s chest as he gave a shout.

“Quenser!! What are you trying to do!?”

“If you want to stand on the same stage as me, you should’ve been at least a little bit better of a guy, noble!!”

Quenser shouted back while stroking his finger over the War Hammer’s wireless trigger.

Even if they shot the boy, he could still blow up the liquid nitrogen

tank if he was not killed instantly.

“Are you still gonna use that radio!?”

“What’s it to you!?”

“If you’re in real trouble, contact me on that frequency. If you kiss the burning asphalt, I’ll listen as you beg for your life!”

Heivia clicked his tongue and withdrew with the other soldiers.

Then the Princess spoke over the radio.

“Now what are you going to do? You lost your hostages, so I don’t have to worry about your tank shield.”

“That just means I need to use a different bargaining chip.”

“Such as?”

“Give me your scent, Princess. That will give me everything I need to defeat the Miska-…the Extra Arc.”

“Maybe I really should kill this pervert…”

“I’m talking about the repellant for your static electricity propulsion device!! It’s divided into small containers you can eject to avoid any trouble if it gets clogged up, right? Eject one of those containers at your feet!!”

Part 13

The Miskatonic was not exactly an easy Object to control.

The Pilot Elite sitting in the cockpit readily admitted that fact.

After all, the main cannons were far too powerful because they took energy directly from the reactor. The extreme recoil needed to be controlled and the brilliant torrent blinded any sensors, whether they used light, heat, sound, or electromagnetic waves. The residual heat could easily set his fellow soldiers on fire and, even if the high-level olfactory sensors could pick up the enemy's location, no other information was known, not even the layout of the terrain. He would often run into buildings or walls and he had often almost plunged right into the rivers of lava he had created.

But he accepted all of that risk.

The great advantage that came with the risk had gathered many people to the Object.

"…"

The monster blinded itself with its own main cannons, so it pursued its enemy by smell.

This was a sightless world.

And this scorching hell gave the advantage to the one accustomed to blindness, even if the other side had greater specs and originality.

Even now, several fluorescent lines were drawn on the pure white screen. Those were the trails from the repellant that supported the enemy Object's static electricity propulsion device. The Elite's prey lay at the end of those trails. With that targeting information in mind, he used a trackball to hold the reins of the eight automatically wriggling tentacles and waited for the enemy to change direction at high speed. In other words, for the instant of motionless when the enemy was controlling their inertia.

In that instant, the leading edge of the “smell” vanished.

A moment later, a new point of light appeared about twenty meters to the left.

But given an Object’s size, that was only a “half step”.

(The repellant reading jumped? Did they use some kind of booster or is something wrong with the olfactory sensors?)

He clenched his teeth and immediately fired the main cannons.

The surrounding speakers were turned off, but a deafening torrent of noise still reached him.

Regardless, it was over now.

The high energy plasma stabbed accurately at the source of the smell and melted even part of the earth’s surface into an orange liquid.

Or it should have.

A moment later, something incomprehensible happened.

An overwhelming heat pierced through the center of the Miskatonic and melted it to the color orange.

Part 14

Quenser and Nyarlathotep's tactics had been simple.

Some spare parts for the Miskatonic had been scattered about. Among them had been the main cannon's giant reel, the tentacle-like tube attached to it, and a sphere several meters in diameter…in other words, a test reactor.

Nyarlathotep had been the one to break the lock on a piece of heavy machinery and then to operate it.

"The setup is simple! Just place it in a giant U-shape near where our Princess is fighting!! Use the War Hammer's laser pointer to get the exact angle of the muzzle more or less right!!"

"Do you really think this will work?"

"It scares me that the test reactor is cold, but it should still work. We don't need to run the entire system. We just need the band of electromagnets inside the main cannon to run, so we should get enough energy even if it isn't in a perfect critical state!!"

The two of them had secretly continued their work while the two Objects continued their intense battle.

Normally, not even a Second Generation specialized for use against other Objects would have overlooked this, but the Miskatonic blinded itself with the flash of its own main cannons and its anti-personnel sensor modification had not been completed. Someone could run right in front of it naked and it would never notice.

Once the preparations were complete, Quenser grabbed the repellant container meant for use with a static electricity propulsion device and placed it near the end of the tentacle main cannon.

He fired one of the War Hammer's jelly explosives on the side of the container and moved far away.

Then he shouted into the radio.

“When I give you the signal, move right past us and switch off your propulsion device! I’ll blow up the container to release the repellant! It should look to him like you made a quick reversal!!”

The moment of truth had finally come.

A brilliant flash was released from the Miskatonic’s tentacle-like main cannon. It was absorbed into the spare part Quenser and Nyarlathotep had laid in a U-shape and it obediently traveled through the tunnel like a signal down a fiber optic cable. It looped hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of times around the wrapped reel and then shot back out the other end.

Yes.

It was almost like the blast had been reflected by a giant mirror.

The result was obvious.

The Miskatonic’s own main cannon blast pierced through its spherical body.

The armor capable of enduring a nuclear blast instantly melted. The air cushion on the bottom and the eight main cannons arranged on the back like a giant flower or straw hat had not melted yet, but those external components and wreckage exploded like a firecracker placed inside the top of some melting ice cream. After a short delay, there was another explosion. The reactor itself had melted and exploded.

Quenser and Nyarlathotep should have been plenty far away, but they were still blasted into the air.

The boy slammed back-first into the ground and entered a fit of damp coughing, but he was still wrapped in a sense of relief.

The greatest enemy had been defeated.

He still had to escape the Legitimacy Kingdom, but the hurdle had just lowered significantly. He grabbed and shook Nyarlathotep’s shoulder as the man lay on the ground nearby.

“Hey, let’s fake our deaths. That explosion had to have blinded the Baby Magnum’s sensors for a while, so how can we make sure they lose our-…”

He trailed off as further terror arrived.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say the battle was not yet over.

Quenser Barbotage had forgotten something.

The Miskatonic’s main cannons gathered and released energy directly from its reactor.

But that also meant the heat built up in the reactor would escape at uneven intervals. Needless to say, that would create extreme irregularities in the energy supply to the entire Object. Normally, it should have lost speed every time it fired its main cannons. In the worst case, the reactor could have even lost its critical state, causing the entire Object to stall.

But it had shown no sign of that whatsoever.

In other words, Quenser’s analysis had been half right and half wrong.

Simply put, it had two reactors.

The eight tentacles extending from the eight flower petals on the giant clock face had fallen to the earth, but one of them released a dreadful blast toward the Baby Magnum.

Part 15

“The Baby Magnum has been damaged! I repeat, the Baby Magnum has been damaged!! Her evasive action failed. The reactor is stable, but the propulsion device’s output has dropped by more than seventy percent. Keeping the Object afloat is the most it can manage, so I doubt she can avoid the next shot!!”

“Dammit!!”

Frolaytia swore at the shouted report from the young female operator.

“I can’t believe that bastard. It has armor that can withstand a nuke, but they still put the cockpit on the outside? That’s a nearly suicidal bluff.”

But it did not matter how bizarre the trick was if they had fallen for it.

A simple tank or bomber could finish off the Extra Arc now, but it would be difficult for Heivia and the others there to make that theory a reality. The eight main cannons would obviously turn the entire area to a hell of lava before they could do anything.

And what would happen if they could not get the testimony from Nyarlathotep, the “true culprit” and only person who could stop the madness from covering the entire globe?

The countdown to mankind’s end had begun.

Part 16

Quenser stood in a daze as he watched the end of the world.

The Miskatonic had had two reactors. Or more accurately, it had been two Objects. Like a bizarre alien attached to the back of someone's head, the cockpit had been attached outside the onion armor.

"…I should have noticed."

The right half of the Baby Magnum looked like melting ice cream. The cannons and armor were all glowing orange. The Miskatonic was forcibly extending and raising its tentacles from the giant flower or giant UFO, but it would be difficult for the Princess to shoot it now.

Nyarlathotep spoke with a thin smile still plastered to his face.

"I don't blame you. I also overlooked it when we found that test reactor. I should have considered the possibility that it was a cartridge and not a spare part. After all, this Object represents a 7th Core corporation and Azathoth spent a massive budget on it. I should have known that it could easily have more than one reactor."

"No, not that."

"What?"

"I should have noticed. Yes, I should have noticed from the very beginning!! How stupid am I!? Was anything I eating sending nutrients to my brain!? I don't have any tits to absorb it all, so where was it all going!?"

"What are you talking about? Are you focusing on something else here?"

"Yes!! The Soberania District across the Panama Canal was getting support from the Legitimacy Kingdom, so I get why it was filled

with rivers of lava! But why did the Miskatonic turn its own side into a sea of flames!? That doesn't make any sense!!"

"It can't rely on its anti-personnel sensors, so it was scattering chemical incendiary rounds to keep any foot soldiers away, right?"

"So what if foot soldiers get close? Are they going to fight this two hundred ton monster with their fists? It wouldn't be afraid of that. Even if the cockpit was built on the outside of the onion armor."

"Then why?" Nyarlathotep looked like that question had only now hit him. "Why was it using the chemical incendiary rounds?"

"To create fiery hell of ninety degrees…no, it would be far hotter in the danger zone. More like a thousand degrees or more."

"?"

"That shrinks the temperature difference between the interior of the reactor and the outside air. You mentioned before that it doesn't need a thick wall to control the plasma, right? Even if they tried, the wall would just melt, so they used powerful magnetic lines instead."

"I see… So it works like a vacuum coffee maker."

"That's right. It didn't want much of a temperature difference between the outside and inside, so it used the incendiary rounds. … But if liquid nitrogen rapidly cools the air and creates too much of a temperature difference when the valve at the base of the tube-like tunnel opens, the high-energy plasma will be drawn from the high to low temperature and from the high to low pressure. And at a level that it can't control. It might even break the valve too badly to close again."

A vacuum coffee maker functioned by changing the pressure inside a sealed container, but pressure changes did not necessarily have to happen inside a sealed container. Some meteorological weapons used dry ice or liquid nitrogen to cool the air and cause a tornado or downburst.

"Even with both its reactors working, there was a risk of melting

itself, so now that it only has one…"

"We can cool the inside enough that it loses its critical state and stalls. No, in the worst case, it might even drown inside that stuff its spewing out itself!!"

As he shouted his idea, Quenser raised his War Hammer at the ready.

The Miskatonic was just beginning to re-aim its tentacle main cannons toward the Baby Magnum.

He fired everything remaining in the thick magazine for 25mm ammunition. The jelly explosives splatted onto the cylindrical tanks around the Miskatonic.

He had no reason to hesitate, so he pulled the wireless trigger and detonated them all.

Explosion after explosion rang out and the thick surfaces of the tanks were blown through. The explosion went beyond what the explosives had been designed for and the entire tanks were blown away. The intense heat of the lava had entered those thermoses and flash vaporized the nitrogen.

A lake of liquid nitrogen quickly formed.

With the sound of stir-frying, the flash vaporization spread and the surrounding fiery hell instantly transformed into an icy hell.

Fortunately, the Miskatonic was barely functioning and did not have the equipment left for a detailed scan of its surroundings.

It released blinding light from its tentacle-like main cannons to eliminate its greatest threat.

A moment later, everything was swallowed up by white light.

This time, every last trace of the Miskatonic was erased from the planet.

Quenser's eyes were nearly fried by the intensity of the explosion,

but Nyarlathotep pulled on his hand when he fell to the ground.

“This isn’t over yet,” said the spy with the neatly parted hair. “You need to punish me to prevent the collapse of the world, don’t you? Let’s vanish before the Legitimacy Kingdom can recover from this confusion. Fortunately, the cloud of nitrogen is still spreading, so those without any chemical warfare equipment will probably be too afraid to approach. We have a chance of escaping now.”

Quenser slowly started to stand up, but another voice stopped him.

“No, this *is* over, you worm.”

A heavy impact ran through the midpoint between the back of Quenser’s head and neck. His knees gave out and he collapsed to the scorching ground.

It took him some time to realize he had been hit by the stock of an assault rifle.

“Hei…via…?”

He received no response.

The most he could do was watch military boots step past his head and toward Nyarlathotep.

The war had ended.

It was truly over and the official records would say the Legitimacy Kingdom had been victorious.

Epilogue

Disobeying orders, desertion on the battlefield, unauthorized use of and destruction with an issued firearm, and jeopardizing the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and the interests of the Legitimacy Kingdom as a whole. Even as a battlefield student, Quenser Barbotage was unable to avoid being thrown in a cell.

“Wow, so I’ve finally gotten thrown behind bars. I wonder if the nasty food can be any worse than those eraser-like rations.”

His solitary confinement cell looked like a dice with five meter sides and the only light was a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Tragically, the only supplies were a portable bathroom and a blanket. The metal door had nothing but a food slot, not even a doorknob. They had most likely removed the knob from his side to prevent the occupant from killing himself by tying the blanket to the knob and his own neck.

Heivia Winchell, his awful friend who had so kindly guided him here, spoke from beyond the steel door.

“You should be thankful you’re at least alive. If you feel like praying to the god of the Faith Organization, I won’t stop you. That’s how much of a miracle this is.”

“Sorry, but I have no intention of saying I was wrong. I clearly did the right thing.”

“How can you possibly say that!?”

“I don’t know if what I did was good or bad, but the results can tell you whether it was wrong or right. Heivia, this result wasn’t due to your effort. If I had handed that POW over to you in that crumbling home, you would have bought a world in flames at the price of a single bullet to the head.”

He received a click of the tongue in response.

The fact that he received no argumentative excuses meant the boy

had enough sense remaining to accept the point.

“Go to hell.”

“You first.”

Believing that the other boy was doing the same, Quenser raised his middle finger toward the door. It may have sounded like a strained atmosphere, but this was just right for those awful friends. In fact, it would have been a lot scarier had Heivia tried to see to his every need with an oddly kind voice. He would have assumed he was being executed soon.

Heivia’s footsteps left.

With nothing to do, Quenser opened and closed the food slot and realized the opposite cell’s slot was open too.

He saw Nyarlathotep’s eyes through it.

“Hi, sorry I can’t throw a moving-in party to celebrate our new home. It’s strange that this cell feels like heaven, but I guess that’s what happens after escaping such an extreme environment.”

“You were given a military trial, weren’t you?”

“Yes, it was quite the farce. It only took thirty seconds from beginning to end. Still, that means my job is complete.”

“Did they only read the defendant’s name and then the judgment? Any lawyer that heard about it would probably start crying.”

“And if they had this ready on the beachhead, there was no need to pay the Blue Cross a visit, was there? We should have raised our hands and surrendered from the beginning.”

“Don’t say that! Are you trying to rub salt in all of my scrapes and aching muscles!?”

But with their sanity so fried, it was entirely possible Heivia and the others could have ignored what the Legitimacy Kingdom as a whole wanted and shot the man. Also, they might not have defeated the

Miskatonic and instead had their entire base wiped out by that plasma. Solely looking at the conclusion, every twist and turn had been necessary to reach this point.

“Even if it was a farce, it was an official trial. It still has real authority when the judgment paper is officially registered under international law. That means we’ve stopped the destruction of the world just like you wanted.”

“That’s good at least. And if they were going to build a statue of me, I kind of feel like having it melted down and sold as scrap metal.”

“Whatever future awaits you, I bow my head to you. I had to kill Azathoth to take revenge for my wife and son. I still feel no shame about that. But if an unrelated safe country had been reduced to rubble in the process, it would have lowered the purity of my revenge. That would be like laying a shit-covered bouquet next to their graves, so I am truly thankful. As part of my job, I was always deceiving people. Even my family. But this alone is not a lie.”

“Hey…what are you-…?”

“And no matter how much that farce of a trial or the history books are distorted, I was blessed to meet someone I could tell the truth to. So here alone, I will include no lies. You were my hope, so don’t worry yourself over what’s about to happen.”

“Wait a minute! What are you talking about!?”

His question received no answer.

Instead, he heard quiet footsteps. When the cell area’s entrance opened, the usual buzzer did not sound. A horribly unpleasant sweat covered Quenser’s face. Finally, someone appeared within his view from the food slot. They were clearly different from the guards and they were holding a small handgun with a silencer.

“Hello there. Are you an assassin from the hawkish hard-liners? Or are you taking revenge for the intelligence division members thrown into the lava?”

The way Nyarlathotep spoke from the opposite cell made it clear he had predicted this moment.

He received no response.

Who could say where the assassin had gotten it from, but he held out a plain gray card that was obviously not official and the cell door opened with almost amusing ease.

This person in a Legitimacy Kingdom uniform stepped inside the opposite cell.

“Wai-…”

Quenser did not even have time to yell.

A few muffled gunshots sounded.

And it did not end there.

It continued.

An intense explosion and tremor shook the Garden Gate megafloat beachhead positioned next to Panama Bay.

“There’s a fire in the cell area! No, calling it an explosion might be more accurate…”

The female operator’s report led Frolaytia to hold her head in her hands.

Noisy footsteps raced by just outside the room.

The explosion must have taken out either the cameras or the wiring because they were receiving no footage from the cell area. A few of the monitors switched from static to some wobbly footage. These images were being transmitted from the small cameras on the soldiers’ helmets.

Heivia was apparently one of those.

Visibility was poor more due to dust than flames, but one of the cells was especially bad. The steel door and even the wall around it had been blown to bits.

“That’s Nyarlathotep’s cell,” said Heivia’s voice as he approached with rifle at the ready. “Oh, no. These fragments…it was blown up from within! Damn, damn, damn! Oh, goddammit!! The inside is covered in red sauce! Who brought an explosive in here!?”

Frolaytia breathed a heavy sigh as she listened.

The thirty second trial had ended the world’s predicament, but she had known what was likely to happen afterwards.

Quenser sighed quietly inside his cell as he listened to the panicked shouts of his friend beyond the slot.

Through that slot, he had seen a truth the others had not.

He knew the face of the true culprit behind this.

It had happened ten minutes before the explosion.

After several muffled gunshots had sounded, a painful silence had fallen. Finally, the steel door had creaked open and Quenser had seen the truth.

He had seen the face of the man in the Legitimacy Kingdom uniform and holding the small handgun with a silencer.

“Nyar...lathotep!?”

“Yes, sorry. I was planning on accepting my fate, but the assassin was even weaker than I expected. Tell your intelligence division to read people’s hearts, not the data.”

With that, Nyarlathotep had stuck a fuse in the plastic explosive he had pulled from his waist pouch and had tossed it inside the empty cell…no, the cell that now contained someone’s bullet-riddled corpse.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Who knows. But I’ve fulfilled the bare minimum of what was required of me. With the judgment paper containing my testimony, the world can escape disaster. Deciding what to do with the rest of my life is my job.”

“Do you really think you can escape? And I’m not just talking about this beachhead. I’m talking about this entire planet that’s so thoroughly controlled by the four world powers!!”

“Ha ha! How many times do I have to tell you?” Nyarlathotep toyed with the radio used as a detonator. “It doesn’t matter if I’m found out here if I can lose them in the end. That’s why this is my specialty.”

A tremendous explosion had followed.

He had not use his counterfeit master key or handgun to kill Quenser.

Most likely, he had been confident he could escape even if the boy did reveal the truth.

“And that’s what supposedly happened. Being a soldier can’t be easy. They say the clean wars can make for a nice temporary home if you bungle your job in a safe country, but it really is all about running around with a gun in hand.”

This was a small Southern European country floating in the Mediterranean. It was a luxury resort region said to be a stepping stone toward a conflict between the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization. A young woman spoke in a bar there, wearing clothing that exposed her shoulders and midriff even though it was only April.

No matter how advanced the firewalls or security systems were, there was no stopping drunk officers from talking as they begged to sleep with some topless women at a luxury resort. This had been a paradise for spies for nearly a century, but the careless fools always

showed up.

The world had been fairly shaken up by the news that the defendant had been blown up shortly after a questionable trial, but once the media realized the masses were not all that interested, they had switched to other topics.

A man sitting in one of the counter's stools poured just a bit of whisky into his glass, watered it down quite a lot, and squeezed some lemon into it. He was shamelessly taking the chicken's way out.

After placing some ham he had not ordered on the counter, the young woman grabbed a piece for herself and spoke up in exasperation.

"If you're afraid of getting drunk, why even go to a bar?"

"It's a sort of ritual. A way of building my resolve, I suppose. I had finished a big job and thought my life was over, but it turned out it wasn't. I'm thinking about what to do with the rest of my life."

"Drinking when you're worried is a good way to become an alcoholic. Drinking because you enjoy it and drinking to keep your worries away are two very different things."

"Don't worry. I said it was to build my resolve, didn't I? I only have to do it once."

"Oh? You said something about a big job, so are you changing careers?"

"Well, in a way. That job used some skills I would prefer not to use if I can avoid it."

He spoke vaguely and may have been thinking back on something as he did so. This young woman was used to speaking with drunks, so this was not unusual for her.

"My life was supposed to end back there, but I felt some lingering regret when I saw that boy."

“Eh!? You’re into boys, old man!?”

“No. …It made me want a kid again. Although it’s not all that noble a desire since it’s only because the memories of my previous wife and son are fading away.”

“Ha ha!! What’s wrong with that? You can redo your life as many times as it takes. Life is long, so god was probably doing you a favor when you broke up with your wife. Getting a clean start and

wrapping your arms around a new wife would probably be a good idea."

The man smiled a little and licked at the watered-down whisky before saying more.

"This is a nice place. I like how it has a way of building a foundation for people."

"Are you really going to stay here for long? The ridiculously high rent is a downside, but if you do what I did and start lodging with a bar and eventually gain enough trust to run the place yourself, you can get a place to live for almost free."

"I see. That's some useful information."

With that said, the man grabbed his glass and drank it down.

He slammed the thick bottom of the glass against the counter and made a suggestion to the surprised young woman.

"By the way, I have a question. Is this bar still accepting new lodgers like when you started out here?"

The man with one thousand faces had walked several different lives with an eerie smile on his face.

Would he throw the entire planet into chaos once more or would he immerse himself in modest happiness?

That was up the world's sanity.

Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Volume 10! I think? This series is structured so the first volume is the "starter volume" and the order of the rest doesn't really matter, so even I sometimes forget. But that doesn't matter as long as I know what was in them!!

The theme this time was a sixth branch of the military I made up to go after the existing five: land, sea, air, marines, and either space or cyber. I defined it as specialists in psychological warfare that thoroughly destroy a human's inner universe. But with the morale of a small unit, the wartime propaganda of an entire nation, or the justification given to the international community, wars already deal with the human heart quite a bit. I defined the Sixth Branch as a centralization of all that which focuses on using destructive information to directly crush the enemy and destroy their organization rather than just using it to gather the most allies.

Plus, I used the terms Yog-Sothoth, Azathoth, Miskatonic, Salem which a certain city was modeled after, the Outer Gods, and Nyarlathotep. With all of that, you should be able to see a certain motif. Since I was using a theme of destroying an opponent's mind, I added in some Cthulhu stuff.

For that reason, I immediately decided to make the Miskatonic's main cannon into eight tentacles to resemble you-know-who's you-know-what. But that might not seem as creepy as it should to us Japanese since we eat octopuses all the time. Firing laser beams from the squirming endoscope cannons might have been a more direct way of doing it, but I followed the theme of "once it surfaces it's all over and simply seeing it drives you mad" by having the cannons draw energy directly from the reactor and creating such

great light and heat that it blinds any and all sensors.

And since I already used a deep sea Object with the Megalodiver, I made this one an evil octopus god ruling over a sea of orange glowing lava.

I think that helped give it the impact needed for a colossal weapon bringing about the end of the world, but what did you think?

The most important aspect this time was the heart. I had a lot of fun with this one by having the great war started for one man's revenge and having the usual two idiots forced to aim their guns at each other. There may have been some scenes that felt different from the usual Heavy Object, but I've always wanted to do the buddy film cliché of the two protagonists parting ways and opposing each other partway through. I think the freedom to not have to center everything on the idea of "doing everything for a girl" is one of the wonderful things about this series.

Nyarlathotep is not the kind of character who can be a protagonist, but I seem to have a habit of occasionally writing a revenge story.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagi Ryou-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. With eight Objects and a city half melted into lava, there was a lot I could write so easily but must have been hard for them. Thank you very much.

I also give my thanks to the readers. This story's theme truly was people and not Objects. The fact that I can call that a rare thing, shows just what a miraculous balance I've set up with this series. I am truly thankful that you've given me an environment where I can spread my wings like that.

And I will end this here.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

The War Hammer might be a little too convenient…

-Kamachi Kazuma